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SWIFT AS THOUGHT THE BOY TRAILER'S RIFLE FLEW TO HIS CHEEK; THE MOMENT
OF VENGEANCE HAD COME!

OR, THE HEROES OF THE CRATER.

A Romance of the No Man's Border.

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"MUSTANG SAM," "DAINTY LANCE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A HAUNTED REFUGE.

"You, Dan'l!"

"I reckon, pap!"

A quick glance over one shoulder accompanied the words, but the lad made no move toward arising and going to the tall, gaunt man, whose bony right hand was beckoning. Whether it was the camp-fire, which he was industriously kindling, or the fair presence of the maiden just

beyond the little pile of dry wood, that dulled his usual promptitude when that harsh voice summoned him, can only be guessed at; but it was enough to bring an anxious light into Elma Dickerman's eyes, and the hasty murmur to her lips:

"Go, Danny, dear; I'll tend to the fire. Don't make him call twice. He's acted so queerly all day!"

"You Dan'-el?"

"Comin'—hot-foot, pap!"

There was little resemblance between the three, though all answered to the same name, and Todd Dickerman called these two his children.

"Fetch yer rifle, Chinc. 'Pears like I ketch-ed a glimps' of a buck down yer way, an' a fresh cut won't come out o' the way," added Todd Dickerman, with a nod over one shoulder, then turning and slouching further away from the dingy, canvas-covered wagon, which had been their only semblance of a home or house for several weeks past.

What slight resemblance there may have been between the two, father and son, came out more strongly just now, as Chincapin Dan followed the elder out to the edge of the timber.

Both walked as still-hunters walk; with slightly bent knees that gave to the weight of the body at each step; with stooping shoulders, every muscle lax and pliable, yet under perfect control, and ready to instantly obey the orders of eye or brain. "Slouchy," is the best term to describe their appearance just then, but it was only the surface laziness which marks the Indian warrior.

Yet there was a difference. What seemed natural and inbred with one, was a careless copy on the part of the other; an imitation that came without thought or purpose.

"Ef they's a buck, he'll be over yan' way," said Chincapin Dan, with a nod toward the brush-filled draw running up among the hills, on the further side of the sluggish river.

"What was you 'nd Elmy talkin' over so mighty busy, Dan'l?"

"Oh, jest—hardly nothin', pap," hesitated the youth, shading his keen eyes with a curved palm as he bent further forward; but it was to hide the flush that stole over his sun-browned face rather than to aid his vision.

"You hain't let on to her that—eh, Dan'l?"

"I know a mighty heap fer to let on, don't I?" half-sulkily retorted the young man, frowning a bit as he shot a glance into that wrinkled face. "I hain't let on nothin'."

His lithe figure poised on his toes, like one ready to leap swiftly aside, but the half-expected blow did not come. Instead, Todd Dickerman actually heaved a sigh, his hard features showing deep trouble or sore anxiety.

"I didn't want, but reckon I'll hev to!" he muttered, more to himself than to his present companion. "I counted on out-footin' the pizen critter, but—Dan'l!"

"I'm right here, pap."

"You think a mighty heap o' Elmy, don't ye?"

"Ain't she my own sister?"

"Waal, I reckon," nodded Todd Dickerman, but with a curious gleam in his small, yellowish eyes, as they quickly turned to sweep the view before them. "An' bein' your sister, you'll fight powerful hard ag'in' any harm comin' to her—eh?"

Chincapin Dan flushed, then turned very pale as he slowly said:

"They was one time—you never knowed it, pap. But they *was* one time—you was lickin' Elmy. I ketched her cryin' out, an'—waal ef the cap hadn't bu'sted, pap, you wouldn't be here to ax me that!"

"Bu'sted a cap at me, did ye?" with a dry grin that showed his snaggy, tobacco-stained teeth. "Tried to shoot your own born dad? An' jest beca'se I was lickin' Elmy?"

Chincapin Dan nodded assent, his dark-gray eyes boldly meeting the gaze of his father. He looked as though he expected a blow, but none came. Todd Dickerman only laughed, softly.

"That was a lucky cap fer me, Dan'l, an' ef I'd 'a' knowed it at the time, you'd 'a' chawed hick'ry right smart! But now—waal, reckon no need to ax will ye fight fer Elmy ag'in' sech inemies as I'm nigh dead sure is runnin' us down to wuss then a whippin'—to heap wuss then plain death fer her, Dan'l!"

"Show me a mark like that, pap, an' I'll guarantee the cap," grimly nodded the youth. "Then you be runnin' from some one?"

The old man cast a swift, furtive glance around, as though suspecting the presence of an eavesdropper. The troubled light deepened in his yellowish eyes, and there was an unusual

quiver to his tobacco-soiled lips as he made reply:

"Ef what I'm runnin' from, Dan'l, should ketch up afore we make the place I'm headin' fer, it'll be sart'in death to you 'nd me, with heap sight wuss fer Elmy. I know you'd do more'n bu'st a cap, an' I reckon mebbe I'd git a mouthful while the racket was playin' toughest; but all that wouldn't count fer a copper cent. Ye cain't fight off the devil, nur yit you cain't fight off a ha'nt!"

"You ain't ha'nted, pap?"

It was almost as much an assertion as a question, yet Chincapin Dan's big eyes grew bigger, his bronzed cheeks a bit paler as the words passed his lips. Possibly he was wondering what would be the result of his trying to "bu'st a cap" at said "haunt."

"Never you mind ef I be or no," surlily grunted Todd Dickerman, turning abruptly away from that wondering gaze, peering out over the slightly undulating prairie across which they had recently toiled. "You go back yer way an' use the eyes natur' gave ye. Show that your trainin' hain't all bin wasted. Look fer sign, an' fetch back yer findin's to me—to me, mind ye, Dan'l," with a fleeting glance toward the camp-fire, now blazing up cheerily, and beside which Elma was standing.

"I won't skeer her, anyway," nodded the young man as he moved away with rifle held at a trail.

Todd Dickerman watched Dan until a swell hid him from sight, then slowly moved back to where the fire had been kindled for the purpose of preparing their evening meal.

"Will Danny be gone long, father?" asked Elma, filling the smoke-blackened coffee-pot and placing it near the fire.

"Ef he was—ef so be it happened that he wasn't never to come back any more, Elmy, would that hit ye hard—eh?"

The maiden dropped the long-handled frying-pan with a clatter, almost leaping to the side of the old man, the grip of her fingers actually causing him to flinch with pain.

"You haven't—he will come back, father?" cried Elma, strong emotions rendering her tones husky and unnatural, while a reddish glow leaped into her glorious black eyes as they strove to read the whole truth in that weather-beaten countenance.

"He will, ef my wishin' kin ketch it that way, be sure, Elmy," replied Dickerman, a bony hand lifting to gently stroke that curl-crowned head. "An' yit—gal, ef ever a pore devil was ha'nted in this world, I'm the critter!"

Dickerman shook off her hands and turned to where the canvas-covered wagon rested under a bushy-topped tree. Crawling inside this, he remained hidden for a few minutes, then emerged and slowly moved over to where Elma was busied with supper.

"Never mind the bacon, Elmy; leave that ontel Dan'l comes back. It ain't fitten fer the likes o' you to play cook fer the likes o' us."

"You are my father, and Daniel is my brother; why should I not cook for you, as well as for myself?"

The words came promptly enough, but for all that there was a curious echo coming from beyond them that caused Todd Dickerman to drop his eyes and nervously chew at his tobacco.

"You wouldn't rather he was somebody else than a brother, Elmy? You wouldn't like him any better, then? He's heap older then his years, Dan'l is, don't ye fergit, Elmy."

A swift flush came into her face, only to fade away, leaving it pale and almost scared. This was not the first time Todd Dickerman had spoken with thinly veiled purpose, but until now she had carelessly attributed it to the influence exerted by the contents of a certain dingy keg resting in the wagon. But now—he had not been drinking, for his breath showed no taint save from his quid.

"You have said too much not to say more, father," she said, resolutely, seating herself on an up-turned wooden pail before the old man. "If—but Daniel is my brother, just as you are my father!"

"I've treated you like a real daddy, hain't I, Elmy?"

"More so than you have poor Danny," impulsively.

"He's a boy, an' sech a spunky imp that ef I didn't keep a stiff cairb onto him he'd jump the traces in a minnit," grimly nodded the old man, one hand fumbling in his breast as though something was hidden there that caused him no little uneasiness. "A chip o' the ole block, his mammy used to say, an' I reckon she wasn't fur off her guess. Anyway, honey, they cain't no great harm come to you long's Dan'l's able fer

to bu'st a cap or play a knife—no they ain't, now!"

"What harm can come to me, father? What is it you are growing so afraid of?" asked Elma, trying to read what might be hidden behind that weather-beaten mask. "If I didn't know better, I'd almost think you were running away from—what, father?"

"The devil on two laigs!" exploded Dickerman, a look of curiously mingled hatred and fear filling his face. "The blackest-hearted imp that ever wore the looks of a man! Ef you ever prayed hard, Elmy, pray that way ag'in' his ever ketchin' us up afore we kin make the place I've bin headin' fer all this trip!"

"Then you are a fugitive? It is only a man you are fleeing from, father?" hesitated the maiden, very pale as she watched his painfully working features.

"From a devil, I tell ye!" doggedly persisted the refugee, his eyes roving swiftly about them, searching the growing shadows beyond the limits of the firelight. "I ain't runnin' from the law, as ye 'pear to think, Elmy," forcing a laugh that sounded hollow and unnatural. "Fer I hain't done nothin' wuss then to be a smarter man's tool; nothin' wuss then to keep what he stole; an' now I'm doin' my level best to make up fer even that."

"What was it he stole, father?"

"A weenty little bit o' baby, Elmy. An' he made me take oath I'd never let on that she wasn't o' my own kin, ontel he was ready to pull off the kiver an' show up the hull truth!"

CHAPTER II.

"IF I AM NOT I, WHO AM I?"

ELMA gave a low cry as she started back, her widely opened eyes fixed on that hard face, trying to read the truth, a gleam of which now for the first time shot into her whirling brain.

A stolen child! A girl baby! A father only by adoption!

Todd Dickerman sprung to his feet, catching up the long rifle that stood resting against the tree beneath which the camp-fire had been kindled, and gliding away into the shadows as though he more than suspected the near vicinity of the enemy from whom he was fleeing so desperately.

He shortly returned, with an air of relief, for those suspicious sounds must have been born of his fears alone.

"I didn't think you'd take it so mighty hard, Elmy," he muttered, softly touching that bowed head. "It ain't all hate o' the pore ole man, honey? You ain't skeered to look up an' see that he's mighty nigh heart-broke at hev'in' to tell ye sech a ugly story, be ye, deary?"

"Not my father?" cried Elma, suddenly lifting her eyes to his face and rising to her feet. "Then who am I? What am I? Where are my people—my home?"

Todd Dickerman shrunk from that passionate gaze, and with drooping eyes he resumed his former seat, the long, rusty rifle leaning across his lap, his fingers mechanically toying with the set-triggers.

"I didn't 'low to let ye know even so much, Elmy, afore we crossed the Texas line, but somethin' warns me that ef I was to wait that long, you'd never know nothin' more'n that you was the born child o' me 'nd the ole woman."

"And Dan—he is my brother?" ventured Elma, as the old man paused to bend an ear in listening.

"You couldn't ax for a better or truer one, could ye, honey?"

"Is he my real brother?" persisted the maiden, still sorely bewildered. "If you are not my father—"

She stopped short as Todd Dickerman drew a small package from his bosom, unfolding the paper and producing an object that glittered brightly in the firelight. It was a locket and chain, chased and enameled, but of no very great value, intrinsically speaking.

He touched a spring, causing the locket to open in halves, then held it toward the girl.

Breathlessly she took it, bending so that the red light fell fairly across the glass-encased portraits therein.

One represented a young woman, hardly older than herself, while on the opposite side was the portrait of a man, young and handsome, with a martial air that matched perfectly with the military garb he wore.

A low cry escaped her lips as she gazed, longest on the woman's face, for that seemed strangely familiar to her eyes. Where had she seen it before?

So intensely was she absorbed in that scrutiny that she never noticed the movements of the old man, until he returned from the wagon a

slipped a small mirror between her eyes and the portrait."

"Mighty like, ain't they, honey?" he laughed, more naturally.

Only for a difference of dress, and the manner of wearing her hair, Elma Dickerman might easily have been the original of that portrait.

"Mother—was that my mother?" softly asked Elma, her dark eyes glistening with sudden tears.

"Ef it wasn't all lies that devil told me, reckon she was," nodded Dickerman, resuming his seat. "An' the other—don't look much like Danny, does it?"

"Not in the least!" promptly replied Elma. "But Danny is my own brother! Don't you dare tell me he is not!"

The old man rose once more and took a more deliberate scout about their camping-ground. That haunting dread was growing momentarily stronger, even while he fought against it with all his stubborn will.

"I don't see how he could 'a' hit it off so mighty quick!" he muttered to himself, gripping his old-time rifle with a vicious energy that was reflected from his yellowish eyes. "Keen-nosed as he is, I counted on foolin' him on a cold trail long 'nough fer to git to Texas an' find a kiver so snug even he wouldn't dast to poke into it!"

He peered across the open, searching the growing gloom for some sign of Chincapin Dan, but without success.

"Mebbe it's jest as well he holds off. I'd heap ruther he wouldn't know 'bout Elmy afore it has to come out, nat'ally."

This thought sent him back to where the girl was still gazing eagerly, almost hungrily at those pictured faces in the locket.

"Where is she? You are taking me to her—to them?" Elma asked.

"You're in sech a hurry to git shet o' daddy, then?" and there was a touch of jealous anger in Dickerman's tones.

"They are my parents?"

"Ef that devil didn't lie all over—yes."

"What devil? Who is the person you fear so much, father?" asked Elma, using the title inadvertently, but letting it stand as she caught that gleam of pleasure in his wrinkled face. "Tell me all—tell me everything about my people, about my dear—mother!"

"They ain't no time fer that, honey," said Dickerman, his face growing darkly anxious again as his uneasy eyes roved about them. "Danny must be comin' mighty soon, an' I'd heap ruther he didn't 'spect anythin' fer a bit, anyway. You won't let on to him?"

"Then he isn't—"

"He's jest as much kin to you as I be, an' no more," doggedly muttered Dickerman, resting his rifle against the tree-trunk and taking a small, flat package from an inner pocket. "An' jest who you be, honey, is writ' down plain an' simple inside o' this bun'le."

Elma extended a hand, but Dickerman drew back the package, shaking his head as he quickly uttered:

"Not yit; not afore you promise me solemn an' true that you won't bu'st the seal nur open the package in any way afore I give ye free an' full leave, Elmy."

"Then tell me—tell me who I am! Tell me why I was stolen from my old home! Tell me where my parents are—they are still living?"

Her face turned pale, her voice broke as she added those words, but Todd Dickerman quickly banished that sudden fear.

"They're both 'live an' well, honey, an' I'm takin' ye to them jest as straight as hosses kin pull ye. As fer the rest—will you promise honest an' true not to bu'st the paper open, Elmy, ef I trust it to yer own keepin'?"

"I promise, if you will tell me more about my—"

Elma broke off abruptly, for even her ears caught the crackling of twigs as though some person was forcing a way through the undergrowth where it was densest, and Todd Dickerman caught up his rifle with the look in his eyes of a hunted wild beast.

"Thank the good Lawd!" gasped the old man, as a peculiar whistle came floating through the gloom. "It's Danny. Here, Elmy, hide it an' don't say a word!" he hurriedly muttered, thrusting the package into the maiden's hands, then striding off to intercept Chincapin Dan.

"Hain't hed no comp'ny, pap?" called out the boy trailer, as he came into the more open space surrounding the camp.

"What makes ye ax that, Dan? You've hit on some sign, then?"

Chincapin Dan cast a keen glance ahead,

drawing a full breath as he caught sight of Elma bending over the fire, seemingly busied in preparing supper.

"Yes; sign 'nough to know that they's other folks in these parts then we be," nodded the young scout.

"How many? Which way? Not on our trail?" breathlessly demanded Dickerman.

"Four. Over yan' by the hills. Not so fur's I hed light to track 'em, they wasn't," curtly replied Daniel.

"Four—that's two to one!" muttered his father.

"They'll be even up when we've each bu'sted a cap."

"An' ef he jest lifts his finger, he kin fetch a hundred more to his back—cuss him!" grated the old man.

"Who kin?"

"Wild Hawk kin."

"That smells mighty Injun, pap?" ventured Dan, a veiled curiosity in his gray eyes.

"He's wuss then an Injun, mighty sight. He's got the evil o' Injun an' bad white all b'iled down in one hide. Wilder Hawkings, Dan'l. B'ar that name in the mind o' ye. Don't fergit it a minnit. An' ef the ole man goes under, an' you cain't sw'ar what made him come so, jest set it down to Wild Hawk an' pull the pay out o' him big's ye know how. Will ye do it, Dan'l?"

"Bet I will!" grimly nodded the young man. "Shell I hit him fu'st, ef I happen to meet up with him? Mebbe that'd save you croakin', pap."

Todd Dickerman made no reply to this filial speech, but turned and slowly made his way back to the campfire, where Elma had the supper well under way.

She felt thankful for this excuse for avoiding the steady, loving gaze of Chincapin Dan. With what she had so recently learned filling her heart and brain, with that important package resting over her heart as it pulsed so rapidly, she dared not meet his eyes, lest he read too much of the truth.

Although she had never really doubted the fact that Todd Dickerman was her own father, Elma had often felt humiliated by his coarse talk and actions, particularly when his wits were bemused in liquor.

More strongly than ever had she felt this of recent years, since her return from boarding-school, where she had spent three years in hard study.

Then, father though she believed him, there had never been as strong a bond of love between them as there was between Daniel and herself.

With Dan, she could laughingly reprove and correct rough ways or speech. With Dickerman, she could only suffer in silence.

In low tones Chincapin Dan gave in his report, telling how he had struck a trail of four footmen, heading into the hill region, and though he carefully followed the back trail, it leading toward their own line of travel, the growing darkness had prevented him from learning whether it really joined or crossed the track of their wagon.

Todd Dickerman frowned as he pondered. That was a strange method of travel for No Man's Land!

Elma called them to supper, and despite their secret anxiety, both father and son ate heartily. Far more so than did Elma, though she made a fair pretense, to appease Dan, more than aught else.

Eager to learn more of her people, Elma sought a word in private with Todd Dickerman, but with scant satisfaction.

"To-morrow, honey," he nodded, uneasily, almost as though he repented having allowed his personal fears to carry him so far beyond what he had lined out for himself. "Dan'l's on-easy over your finicky pickin' at supper, an' he won't give us a fa'r chance. Wait ontel to-morrow, an' mind what I told ye 'bout not bu'st-in' that paper open."

With this Elma was forced to be content, and though she was usually fond of sitting in the gloom and talking with Dan, that night she early sought her bed inside the covered wagon.

Chincapin Dan took the first watch, by request of his father, but nothing occurred to alarm the camp until after midnight. Todd Dickerman relieved Dan, who curled up in his blanket under a scrubby bush, the night being too warm to call for artificial heat, and almost instantly the healthy youth fell soundly asleep.

To be awakened by a shot, and an awful cry of mortal agony!

To spring erect, rifle in hand, glaring around in startled horror.

To see his old father writhing on the ground near the dying camp-fire, staining the ground with his life-blood.

To catch a glimpse of a heavily-bearded face looking at him over a leveled rifle, and then the sky seemed to drop upon his head!

CHAPTER III.

A WILD HAWK AND SLY FOX.

A PAIR of keen, restless eyes caught sight of a tiny twinkle of red light through the timber, and almost like magic both horse and rider dropped to the ground where the rank, untrod-den grass covered both from sight, supposing any person was watching in that direction from the woody cover.

"Steady, old fellow!" muttered the horseman, as he passed a hand over the neck and head of his steed. "Just play you're taking a nap for a bit, while I look into that sign over yonder."

With a barely audible whimper the admirably trained creature lay motionless, stretched out at full length as though dead, only a slight pricking of its ears betraying a consciousness of the silent retreat of its master.

"Can't be the boys?" muttered the man, crouching low as he stole toward that tell-tale twinkle of light, hand on pistol, ready for action. "If they're so careless, after my warning—well, I'll make some of them mighty sick for it!"

His strong jaw closed with a vicious click at that, for he was not one to waste threats idly, and in a very short space of time he knew he would command the whole truth.

That ray of ruddy light was no longer visible, owing to his change of position and altitude, but he had noted the direction on the instant, and knew that he was heading true.

The growth of grass shortened as he neared the edge of the timber, and from crouching he lay flat on his stomach, seemingly gifted with the peculiar powers of a snake, so smoothly, so easily did he glide over the ground.

Though there was still a faint show of color just over the western horizon, the twilight was rapidly deepening into night, and even if watchful eyes were on guard, they must have been more than ordinarily keen to have detected that Indian-like advance before the fringe of undergrowth effectually covered the spy from sight.

Once within the border of the timber, the spy used still greater caution, and not even the rustle of a dry leaf, the snapping of a dead twig or faintest swish of released branch denoted his progress. Death itself could not have crept more stilly upon a victim than he did upon those careless fellows squatting on their heels about the camp-fire.

Long before he gained a point from whence he could fully inspect the campers, the spy knew that they were not his "boys," as he had at first suspected; but this discovery only whetted his curiosity, while it lessened his dangerous anger.

"I've heard that cackle before!" he mentally exclaimed, as a peculiar laugh rung out on the night air. "When? Where? Who—Jimmy Gee, as I'm a Christian saint!"

"Ef I only could!" came closely after that shrill, cracked laugh. "Ef I could jest let on to Kunnel Jo who done it all—ef I could be nigh 'nough fer to see his face when the kids gits back an' tells how they was sot afoot—by spooks, or some sich!"

"They'd be one more spook ready fer cock-crow, ef you was, or I don't know the kunnel fer a cent, Jimmy," grimly laughed one of his four mates.

"They wouldn't be 'nough left fer a ghost, even," cackled Jimmy Gee. "Not even the prent o' his durned ole quirt—an' that cut deep enough fer to outlast a heap bigger body then mine!"

"You take it mighty sight easier than I could," with a shrug of his broad shoulders, "I never ketched the whip that way, but ef I hed, they's only one sort o' liniment I'd ever think o' tryin'." An' that's red—red as blood!"

"Mebbe I'll try it, too," grinned Jimmy Gee, his wrinkled, foxy face looking anything but agreeable as he spoke. "But I'm goin' to work by degrees, like. I'll try yaller liniment, fu'st, an' right back thar you kin see what'll make the fu'st brew. It'll taste all the richer from comin' out o' Kunnel Jo's pockets, mind ye!"

A short nod of his grizzled head called the eyes of the spy to where a number of fine horses were tethered, lazily cropping the tender twigs about them, though hardly from hunger.

Though this conversation was a little enigmatical to an outsider, the spy had seen enough to convince him that in this little gang of ruf-

fians he would find metal fairly worthy his own following, and with a hand on his ready revolver, he rose erect and stepped briskly into the clearing where the full light of the fire fell over his figure.

"How, Jimmy Gee!" he spoke, his hands instantly rising to a level with a pistol clasped in each set of fingers as the quintette sprang to their feet in angry alarm.

"Who the devil—"

"Devil goes—and you go, gents, unless it's empty hands!" sharply cried the stranger, his weapons seeming to cover each and all of the surprised party. "Peace for choice—war if you will have it so!"

"Don't—ain't it—" stammered Jimmy Gee, shrinking and lifting one shoulder to partly cover his precious head.

"Wild Hawk—no less, Jimmy," nodded the spy, still holding the drop with cool nerve, though a smile was creeping into his sun-embrowned face. "Shall I salivate you, to teach your wolves better manners?"

"It's all right, boys!" gasped the cringing rascal, trying to throw a cheery welcome into his voice, but failing miserably. "Good Lawd, pardner! ef I ever see a critter I was gladder to see, I'd like to see him right this holy minnit—so I would, now!"

"Don't try to make Jimmy Gee out a liar, gentlemen," nodded Wild Hawk, as he termed himself. "After you is manners, and—the battery goes under cover!"

Like one perfectly satisfied that no advantage would be taken of him, Wild Hawk lowered his weapons and slipped them back into their spring-top scabbards, an empty right hand going out to grip the bony fingers of that foxy-looking rascal.

"I made sure you had pulled hemp ages ago, Jimmy Gee," he laughed, his voice sounding mellow and even musical, now. "But it seems you got off with a simple flogging. Did Colonel Jo pile it on pretty thick?"

"Satan blow slack lime up his britches!" snarled the foxy rascal, with a contortion that showed his snaggy teeth. "What you know 'bout that devil on ten wheels, Hawkings?"

"I know a Colonel Jo, Jimmy, but whether he is your Colonel Jo is more than I can tell, just at present," laughed Hawkings, dropping on his heels and fishing with a bowie-knife in the foul skillet beside the fire. "I'll know better when you tell me some of your past experience, while I'm taking the curse off. Riding makes a fellow powerful sharp-set, don't it?"

There was no immediate reply, and Jimmy Gee seemed taking the full measure of his uninvited guest by the light of the camp-fire.

He saw a figure of medium height and average build, with trim, yet muscular limbs. He saw a face dark almost to swarthinness, though part of this was plainly owing to long and constant exposure to the sun and tanning winds of the plains.

It was a face that many would have termed handsome, despite the air of fierceness lent by his short curved nose, and the peculiar reddish glitter which seemed natural to his jet black eyes.

Wilder Hawkings wore a full beard, kept rather closely cropped, jetty black save for a narrow band of tawny hair that ran from his lower lip downward.

His garb was simple, yet of fine materials. His shirt was of silk, gayly embroidered down the front and on his rolling collar. Two glittering diamonds served as buttons, and the gold ring securing the ends of his tie—a crimson 'kerchief, folded beneath the collar—also held a valuable brilliant.

On his left hand sparkled another gem of value, and across his breast dangled a massive chain of golden links, ending in a watch-pocket at his waist; for he wore no vest under his loose sack coat of black velveteen.

About his waist was a belt of silk webbing, serving as cartridg-holder for both revolvers and repeating rifle.

A soft felt hat, fawn in color, and fine leather riding-boots completed his garb.

The covetous gaze of Jimmy Gee rested longest on those sparkling jewels, and he interchanged a swift glance with his mates, making a slight signal with the hand best concealed from the keen eyes of his guest, before answering that pretty blunt hint for further information concerning "Colonel Jo."

"Mebbe your Kunnel Jo don't live over the Texas line, Hawkings?"

"Maybe he does, Jimmy, and—bark!" lifting his head and looking over his shoulder. "Isn't that a hawk?"

Immediately following his query there rung

out the wild, shrill scream of the hen-harrier, so natural, so perfect in its imitation that even Jimmy Gee could hardly believe that the sound came through human lips.

"I reckon I was fooled," laughed Wilder Hawkings, turning once more to his frugal meal of bacon and corn-cakes. "If I wasn't, the bird would have answered my challenge—eh, Jimmy?"

"Mebbe it was a two-legged hawk!"

"Did you ever meet up with any other kind, Jimmy," smiled his guest, wiping his knife by plunging the blade deep into the ground. "But never mind that; what I'd rather know is, have you seen any signs of a wagon 'round these parts, Jimmy?"

"A kivered wagon? With two hosses in gears, an' two other hosses in lead or under saddle? With two men an' one gal? That the sort, mebbe, pardner?" slowly uttered Gee, squinting keenly into the other's face through his nearly closed lids.

"A man and a lad—you might call him a man, perhaps," nodded Hawkings, his eagerness plainly showing in both face and voice. "When and where did you see them, Jimmy? How far are they from here?"

"Mebbe you've bin lookin' fer sech, pardner?"

"I was hunting their trail when I spotted your camp," said Hawkings, regaining his usual self-control, seemingly conscious of having betrayed too deep an interest in the matter. "Of course I could hit it off easy enough in the morning, but I'm willing to pay you a trifle for sparing me that trouble, if you can do it. What say?"

"They's four hosses in the outfit, pardner," slowly uttered Gee, his sharp features looking even more foxy than usual, as the one of his mates, who had moved carelessly away in the direction of their horses, returned to the camp-fire. "We've got a weenty herd over yan', but it lacks jest four head o' makin' a full bunch."

"What has that got to do with my question?" sharply asked Wild Hawkings.

"An' they's jest four critters in that outfit, mind ye, pardner," repeated Jimmy Gee. "An' we want four to fill out our hand. And so—reckon mebbe you'd better hunt up that trail your own self, Hawkings!"

Those jet-black eyes wore a redder tinge as they fixed on the face of the sly old fox, but Wilder Hawkings was no fool. He saw that, careless as was the attitude of Jimmy Gee in seeming, the fellow was squatting on guard, a hand on the butt of a revolver, the muzzle of which protruded far enough through the bottom of the scabbard to make a snap-shot sure as it was harmless to the weapon itself.

"Curse the horses!" he flashed, with difficulty keeping his ugly temper in bonds. "You can have the animals and welcome, but don't you dare lift your rascally eyes to the girl! She's my game, and a thousand such as you can't step between us!"

"What's to hinder, ef the notion should ketch us?" grinned Jimmy Gee, his pistol lifting barely enough to cover his guest without being drawn from its scabbard. "What's to hinder us from takin' hosses, gal, an' you in the bargain, pardner?"

For as one man, his four mates drew and covered Wilder Hawkings with their pistols.

CHAPTER IV.

COUNTING THEIR CHICKENS.

MORTAL man never stood closer to his grave than did Wilder Hawkings in that moment; and had he flinched in the slightest, had he made even the faintest sign toward reaching a weapon, his career would have ended then and there, so far as this world is concerned.

Instead, he simply laughed: lightly, mockingly, without the slightest trace of fear in face or voice as he uttered:

"Hold your fire, lads. Don't shoot the poor fools unless I give the word!"

"We'll fool you ef you make a move, critter!" flashed Jimmy Gee.

"And you're fooled already, or you'd know what that call of mine signified, Jimmy Gee," smiled Wild Hawk. "My boys have you lined."

"I didn't see a soul—" began the fellow who had stolen away from the camp-fire a brief while before.

"Because Hawks haven't anything more spiritual than gizzards, no doubt," mocked the cool customer, then abruptly altering tones to one of stern command: "Riddle the first idiot that refuses to put up his guns, men! Empty hands, you fools!"

Swift following those commands came the wild

scream of a hawk, ringing through the timber and apparently answered back from a dozen points of the compass. Though they knew the signal came from the lips of the man under their weapons, Jimmy Gee and his fellows were cowed, for they never doubted their being surrounded by armed men ready to execute the slightest hint of this cool, iron-nerved outlaw.

"We was only foolin', boss," whined Jimmy Gee, dropping his pistol and shivering as he cast an apprehensive glance over his shoulder.

"That's all right, Jimmy," nodded Hawkings, carelessly, taking a cigar from the stiff leather case and lighting it. "I've met up with just such fools before now, thanks to my dainty sparklers, here. Of course you didn't mean any harm, but business is business, and I'm its prophet."

"You forgot to tell me how far away that wagon-trail lies?"

"Not two mild off, over yan' way," with a sulky nod of his head.

"You spotted them, then? You saw the people? One was tall, old, grizzle-bearded, with a stoop in his shoulders. The other man was but a lad in years, light complexioned. The third was a girl, black hair and eyes, trim figure, pretty as a posy?"

"An' four mighty good hosses—yes, boss!"

"You can have the animals, as I said before," with a short, hard laugh. "I'm after higher game than any that ever wore hoofs. Now—what have you been doing in this region, Jimmy? Didn't you know it belonged to the Hawks?"

"Ain't bin doin' nothin'," growled the foxy rascal, his eyes drooping before that keen gaze.

"How about Colonel Jo, and setting the kids afoot?"

"You was listenin', then?" gasped Gee, turning a sickly yellow.

"Spellbound by the music of your sweet bazoo, Jimmy," laughed Wild Hawk, mockingly. "I really thought your fire had been kindled by my Hawks, and stole up to read them a lesson for being so careless as to fling out a beacon light for travelers or Indian scouts. Then, when I recognized your sweet cackle, Jimmy, I stood bewitched. Long enough to make out that you hadn't forgotten your old tricks. Whose horses have you run off this trip, old fellow?"

"Jest a pack o' kids an' a ole cuss what used me all over dirt 'cross the Texas line, boss," muttered Jimmy Gee, uneasily shifting on his seat as he cast shy glances past the circle of firelight, no doubt trying to catch a glimpse of those hinted-at rifles in ambush.

"Shall I let one of them bark, Jimmy?" laughed Hawkings, meaningly. "You may possibly think I'm lying in saying that my lads have you under cover. If so—"

"Ef you're hawk, ain't we buzzards?" forcing a grin that meant for a while.

"And you feel like flocking together—eh? Well," with a slow nod of his head as he settled back into an easier position. "I don't say we can't, Jimmy. I've had dirtier rascals under me than any of your gang—though it makes me blush to say as much!"

"They's room 'nough fer us all, ain't they?" growled one of the fellows thus summed up.

"Not room enough for two different gangs, my fine fellow. If I don't choose to take you into my band, I'll have to run you up a tree. Kick the cur, Jimmy Gee, and teach him not to growl at his master!"

Where threats alone might have failed, this cool insolence prevailed, and the cowed ruffian drooped his ruffled feathers.

"Now who is your Colonel Jo, Jimmy?" persisted Hawkings, a veil of smoke hiding the intense interest with which he awaited the answer. "Not Colonel Joseph Townsend, of Texas, surely?"

"That same durn critter!" snapped Gee, showing his tusches with a vicious grin. "Ef you've got a grudge ag'inst him—"

"I have, for a fact!" flashed Hawkings, rising erect, casting his cigar away, his eyes ablaze with hatred undisguised. "Curses pile on his head mountains high!"

"Good fer keeps!" cried Jimmy Gee, in high glee. "Then—it's his kids we've sot afoot, pardner!"

"Tell me all about it, Jimmy," said Hawkings, suddenly calming down, in outward seeming, at least. "What are his kids doing over this side of the line?"

"Come over fer a hunt—an' mebbe they ain't jest gittin' it, too!" laughed the old fox, gleefully. "Huntin' fer tha'r hosses! Huntin' fer the pizen critters which run 'em off! Huntin'—waal, mebbe it's a grave they're huntin', ef I

could only jest make up my mind which one Kunnel Jo'd hate wu'st to lose that-a-way!"

Hawkings gave a start at that cruel speech, but then forced a smile to cover it.

"That would sting mighty sharp, I reckon, Jimmy; losing a kid. It brought to mind another loss—but that don't count. You say you're willing to join hands with my band in a little bit of work, I think?"

"We want hosses, an' they's four mighty piert critters 'long o' that wagon," hesitated Gee. "We jest hit the trail t'other day, an' to-day we ketched a fa'r squint at 'em as they was makin' tracks fer timber. We 'lowed to lay by in here ontel later, then jump 'em when eyes is hangin' heaviest. But now—"

"But now you know that your game belongs to me," curtly interposed Hawkings, his dark eyes glowing vividly as his keen ears caught sounds coming faintly from toward the outer edge of the timber. "You had your chance and let it slip, like the poor fools I called you."

"But ef we help, what sheer 'll we git?" whined Jimmy Gee.

"Just what offal I choose to throw you, curs!" flashed Wild Hawk, insolently. "You had the power to force a bargain with me, but you let the time slip by. Now—my men are really here, at last!"

His ear-splitting call rung out, immediately answered by a swift crashing through the undergrowth, then half a score armed men leaped into the circle of firelight, their rifles leveled and covering the cowering, outwitted rascals under Jimmy Gee.

"Don't shoot—don't, fer love o'—"

"Don't waste ammunition, lads," grimly laughed Wild Hawk, a single gesture causing each rifle muzzle to lift, though the weapons were still kept ready for quick use in case of need.

"Then—they jest come up, boss?" faltered Jimmy Gee.

"Why were you so infernally slow, men?" frowned Hawkings.

"We came as soon as we heard your call, captain," respectfully replied one of the men; a tall, handsome, reckless looking fellow. "If you called more than once, we never caught the sound. We went into camp full a mile from this spot."

"Never mind; you got here in time, after all. Fall back, boys, and take it easy. These are buzzards of pure feather, and they'll hardly claim more of the game than rightfully belongs to them."

"The game is found, then, captain?"

"Found, and all but taken," laughed Hawkings, his eyes aglow.

He stepped forward and tapped Jimmy Gee on a shoulder, saying:

"A word in your private ear, Jimmy. We'll leave the boys to get fairly acquainted over a bottle, but you and I can find plenty inspiration in talk—over Colonel Jo, for instance!"

The foxy rascal meekly followed his superior across the little clearing wrought by the hand of nature, though it was evident that he was still far from being at ease in such imperious company.

"You hate Jo Townsend, Jimmy?" softly asked Hawkings, when fairly beyond earshot of the others.

"Ef you could see the scars on the back o' me you'd know that 'thout axin', boss."

"And just to spite him, you've run off the horses of his boys?"

"Fer spite, an' then, you know, sech hosses as the kunnel owns is plenty good fer heap ding-bats, boss!"

Wilder Hawkings flung out a hand in scorn.

"Once a horse-thief, always a horse-thief! Left to yourself, Jimmy Gee, you'd never look higher than a picket-pin, but if I can tell you how to sting the colonel a thousand times sharper than by running off a few head of his stock, would you have nerve enough to go into it?"

"It ain't killin', boss?" hesitated Gee.

"Didn't you just say that you'd find a grave for one of his kids?" sharply demanded the other.

"Sayin' an' doin's mighty heap dif'runt, boss."

"With rascals of your caliber—I believe it!" hot scorn flashing from eyes and showing in tone as the words passed his lips.

"But ef they wasn't too mighty much resk o' hev'in' the hull world find out jest who done it—Waal, you didn't git clean through, I reckon, boss?"

"Your Colonel Jo has a brother, who—"

"Hed a brother, putt it, boss."

"What do you mean by that?" fiercely de-

manded Hawkings, gripping him by an arm so viciously that, tough old rascal though he was, Jimmy Gee fairly writhed with pain.

"He's dead, Major Ed is, boss."

Wilder Hawkings dropped his arm, almost staggering as he stared into that contorted face, hoarsely gasping:

"Dead? Edward Townsend dead? And I never heard—you're lying to me, Jimmy Gee! Say you're lying, or I'll crush your evil bones as I might crush a bunch of dry grass!"

"Ef you say I be, boss," whined the rascal, shrinking. "But—they planted him plenty deep fer a livin' man, anyway."

"Dead—Edward Townsend dead!" echoed Hawkings, then making a desperate effort to rally his scattered wits. "You saw him buried? How did he die? Who killed him?"

"His hoss—leastways a hole his hoss stuck a hoof through," hastily explained Jimmy Gee. "Fell an' rolled clean over the major. He was clean gone when they picked him up; 'peared like they wasn't never no bone into the neck o' him, it was that bad cracked all up."

"Dead! and I was just getting ready to strike him the last, bitterest blow!" muttered Hawkings, seeming to forget what keen and wakeful ears were close beside him. "Dead! even at the last he's cheated me—Satan keep his bed warm this bitter black night."

"But Kunnel Jo is still livin', boss," almost timidly ventured Jimmy Gee, as he vainly waited for further speech from those blanched lips. "Mebbe you kin take it out o' him. They was twins, ye know, an' ef one stubbed his toe, t'other 'ne hollered loudest."

Wilder Hawkings gave a start, brushing a hand swiftly across his brow, as though to banish a lingering vision. At first he seemed unable to recognize his present companion, but then a fierce grin distorted his face as he viciously said:

"Right! I'll strike Colonel Jo, since Major Ed has escaped me! At least I'll have the ghost of vengeance, if the substance has fled!"

CHAPTER V.

A DISGUSTED HUNTING PARTY.

"BUT thar's Kunnel Jo—"

"Don't we know it?" sourly growled one of the lads. "If it wasn't for Colonel Jo and the laugh he carries back of his eyes, it wouldn't be nigh such a bitter pill to swallow."

"Tain't Kunnel Jo's laugh that I'm thinkin' 'bout—wuss luck!" dolefully groaned the old man, as he struck a match to kindle the fire. "Laughin' don't kill, nur yit break no bones. An' the kunnel says, says he: 'I'm holdin' of ye 'sponsible, Uncle Billy Breeze,' says he, 'fer the safe goin' an' the safe comin' back o' them pesky kids,' says he, 'an' ef any harm comes to 'em,' says he, 'Uncle Billy,' says he, 'I'll peel yer blessed hide,' says he, 'fer to plait a cow-whip out o', says he. An' billy-be-durned ef I cain't jest begin fer to feel the hide beginnin' fer to git ready to commence slippin' off, so I do, now!"

"There's only one chance I see for you, Uncle Billy," nodded the eldest of the three youngsters, a handsome, curly-headed fellow.

"If Colonel Jo said he'd skin you, be sure he'll do it, and never bat an eye. So all that's left for you, Uncle Billy, is to join with us in our oath to recover the nags or perish in the deadly effort!"

"Twixt the devil an' the deep sea!" groaned the veteran, brushing a hand across his beaded brow, gazing wistfully, almost beseechingly, from face to face, as the ruddy glow of the camp-fire grew brighter. "Ef ever I'm sech a monstrous fool as to set out 'long 'ith a pack o' clean plum all-over crazy—"

"Bite it off, Uncle Billy," laughed the last of the little party, who had until now kept silence. "We're tired to death already. Don't make us still more weary, I beseech thee!"

Billy Breeze choked back a howl of disgust, and forced himself to hasten preparations for the evening meal; very simple, indeed, since there was only fresh meat to cook, without other conveniences than the fire and a few sharpened sticks.

This was the evening of their fourth day afoot, and though each member of the little party was strong, healthy, active, and well-trained, all of them showed the effects of their toils.

In point of age, if nothing else, Uncle Billy Breeze comes first.

He might have been anywhere between fifty and seventy years of age; the last figure in looks, the first in actions. His long hair and beard were snowy white, save for a pathway down

from his lips, where tobacco-juice had left its yellow trail. Such of his face as was open to inspection, showed full of wrinkles, brown, and seemingly tough as sole-leather.

Only for the habitual stoop in his shoulders, Uncle Billy could have served as two yardsticks, with ample room for a hand-grip at either end.

His bony frame carried no extra flesh, and when a stranger first saw him in motion, he instinctively listened to hear the rattling of dry bones.

Next in point of age, comes Clark Temple—"Curly," his cousins and other intimates habitually call him—who has quite recently passed his twenty-first mile-post.

Under more favorable circumstances, it would be no easy task to pick out a finer specimen of a "prairie dandy" than this same Curly Temple; and even now Clark showed to good advantage by the light of the cheery camp-fire.

He was tall, just brushing the six-foot mark with his curls. His figure was perfectly proportioned, and might have been taken as a model of youthful, manly grace, strength and power.

His curly crop of hair was yellow, almost gold in color, fine and soft as silk. A pair of mustaches, only a shade lighter, graced his curved upper lip, shading his mouth without concealing its rich color or its strength.

His eyes were large, yet keen, blue as the summer sky, honest and frank; eyes to trust in friendship, to shun in enmity.

He was dressed in velveteen, almost dead-grass in color, and though the hue itself might have been more becoming, it showed the natural sportsman.

Frank Townsend, just past his nineteenth year, was slender, graceful rather than athletic, though an experienced eye could have told the years to come would fill him out and broaden his shoulders. Even now Frank would prove an awkward customer in a close hug, while at arm's length his pantherish activity would render him especially dangerous.

He was true Townsend, his friends were wont to say; darkly beautiful, with clear complexion, the red showing through the dusk, with jet-black hair and eyes. A dim, prospective mustache shaded his lip.

The fourth and last of the party, was Will Townsend, brother to Frank, cousin to Curly Temple. Will was seventeen years old, rather short, but heavily built, making up in muscle what he lacked in activity.

He, too, was Townsend in complexion, being dark, and if not so handsome as his elder brother, he was franker, more jolly, always with a quip or a joke, no matter how gloomy the prospects ahead.

Little more than one month before, this party had left their home in Texas, bound for "No Man's Land" and "the Nation" as the Indian Territory is popularly called, for the purpose of having a jolly good time, hunting, fishing, living "on the loose" for an indefinite period, the exact length of which was to be decided by their own sweet wills.

For a time all went well. They were armed with a Government permit, which insured them against trouble from the Indian police. They rode splendid horses, were thoroughly armed and equipped, had ample stores and ammunition, with extra animals for packing purposes; and even Uncle Billy Breeze for a time forgot how to growl or grumble.

But then a heavy blow was dealt them, just when they least expected it. Their stock was run off in the night, so cunningly that not until broad daylight was their loss discovered.

That was now four days ago. The trail was plain, and the four hunters lost little time in taking it up, pressing steadily on until high noon.

Then, for the first time, the horse-thieves seemed to think of being followed by those they had despoiled. The trail divided, spreading out like the rays of an opened fan.

While eating a hasty bite, the pursuers held a consultation, finally agreeing that it would be worse than foolhardy to think of separating, and determining to stick to the tracks left by Curly Clark's horse, the finest and most valuable of the lot.

There was no difficulty in picking this out, to the boy hunters. Young though they were, they had improved their time and opportunity, until hardly Uncle Billy Breeze himself could give them points at following a blind trail. And those dim hoof-prints were as readily recognizable to their eyes as though each one was a photograph of the animal itself.

That day's work was but a sample of what followed. Little effort had been made, apparently, to break the trail, though the horse-thieves would come together, only to divide again after a few miles in company.

Back and forth, in wide circles, the trail would lead the dogged pursuers, until even the slowest-witted among them knew that the rascals must be playing with them, much as a cat toys with a mouse.

"An' all the time they're jest waitin' fer a good-an'-hungry fit to hit 'em!" groaned Uncle Billy Breeze, at the end of the second day. "An' when it do come—good-by the passel o' us all!"

That evening he began to reason and coax and even beg that they abandon the phantom trail, turning their faces homeward, lest even worse should befall; but the boys were stubborn, and swore that they'd never give over as long as they could drag one foot after another.

On the third evening, Uncle Billy Breeze picked up a peculiarly-shaped buckle, which every one of the party recognized as soon as their attention was called to it.

"That does settle it, gents," groaned the old man, dolefully wagging his frosty pow. "That says Jimmy Gee is doin' of all this bedevilment. An' Jimmy Gee is bloody-marked all over the back o' him. An' Kunnel Jo done the paintin'. An' so—we're goin' fer to pull out fer home jest as soon's the blessed sun peeps out o' bed in the mornin'—so we jest be, now!"

"Then you'll show us Jimmy Gee and our nags, Uncle Billy," curtly said Frank Townsend.

"And we'll show you Jimmy Gee and a rope, Uncle Billy," grimly nodded Will, stretching his weary limbs on the cool grass.

"Before the crack o' day, Uncle Billy, or you stand forsworn," was the contribution of Curly Clark Temple. "Because it makes us tired to walk. And because Colonel Jo would laugh us out of Texas were we to come back afoot!"

That was the main point. The young fellows had scoffed at the bare idea of having their animals stolen when they started forth on their pleasure trip. Others might so suffer, but not they!

From that hour on, Uncle Billy Breeze led a life of torment, for he felt himself responsible for the safe return of the boy hunters, and he would rather have suffered death by fire than to face Colonel Jo with word of their loss, or the loss of any one of the little party.

Yet this he felt would surely be the end, for he knew how vicious a rascal like Jimmy Gee could be, and after receiving such a thorough flogging at the hands of Colonel Townsend, he would hardly rest content with simply stealing a few horses, when he might strike a heavier blow without much risk of its ever being found out.

For, of course, the loss of his deeply cherished hat-buckle must have been a pure accident, with the chance a thousand to one against its ever being found by those with whom he was so maliciously toying; or, if found, its being recognized as having once belonged to him.

Uncle Billy Breeze managed to crush down his doleful dumps while preparing supper, such as it was: for, of course, they had long since abandoned their camp-outfit, since their weapons and their own weight was all they could afford to carry along such an interminable trail; but then he once more opened his dismal batteries, croaking worse than any raven.

The worn and weary hunters let him ramble on without checking for a goodly time, but then, as he showed no signs of letting up, they once for all laid down the law.

Let what might happen, they would never give over until the trail was completely lost, or they had recovered their animals.

"You can pull out for Texas just as soon as you're liking, Billy Breeze," said Frank, coldly. "But I'd advise you to keep clear of Colonel Jo until we're back home again. He might do do worse than laugh at you."

"Don't I know he would—wuss luck!" moaned the wretched veteran. "Ef it was only sech pesky, bull-headed crazy loonatics to thunder an' back ag'in—good Lawd!"

With a snort of utter disgust Uncle Billy hurled his meat-stick into the fire, and strode away into the growing gloom.

"He'll get over it," yawned Curly Clark, stretching his arms and looking around for a soft spot in which to make his nest for the night. "Uncle Billy's chuck-full of misery, but he's true-blue, for all."

"Indigo isn't a patching beside him!" growled Frank, sleepily. "It is his watch, isn't it? Then

I'm going to retire. If you kick the cover off, Will, I'll spank you bald-headed!"

There was no reply, for Will was already snoring, so completely was he worn out by those four long days of steady tramping.

Uncle Billy Breeze took up his watch, seemingly proof against both fatigue and loss of sleep. He covered the dying fire with loose dirt, lest its rays should attract dangerous attention, then squatted down under a bush where he could see and not be seen.

Hour after hour passed by without aught occurring to alarm him, but then, shortly after midnight, according to his calculation, the sound of distant firing brought him to his feet, all alert.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MIDNIGHT TRAGEDY.

THOSE ominous sounds died out, almost as quickly as they were born, but Uncle Billy Breeze had time to locate the quarter.

"Down yen' in the timmer, by the river!" he muttered, crouching low and running rapidly over the gentle slope ahead of him. "Right whar the younkens wanted to go into camp, too! Didn't I jest know it?"

A sound ahead—just of what nature he failed to comprehend—caused the veteran to hurriedly hunt cover, his rifle ready for use at a moment's warning, his little eyes roving swiftly, keenly all around him.

Minute after minute passed without that sound being repeated, and finally the old man crawled in a semi-circle around the suspected point, satisfying himself that no mortal being was hidden there.

"Reckon 'twas a jack I skeered up," he muttered, with a breath of relief, resuming his advance and only pausing when he could command a fair view of the lower level, through which wound the sluggish stream of which mention has already been made. "An' thar—what is it?"

A fire, beyond a doubt, for a ruddy glare was painting the trees and showing a dull glimmer across the river itself.

"Ef it's a camp, they must be a hull rijimint right thar!" grimly nodded the veteran, straining his eyes in the hope of learning more.

But though the glow grew brighter, rising higher each moment, and though he could catch an occasional glimpse of a fiery tongue itself, that was all. If human beings were gathered about the fire, the dense undergrowth shielded their movements from his eyes.

"Ef 'tain't Jimmy Gee, it's some other devil's doin's!"

Uncle Billy looked to his weapons, then cast a doubting glance back toward the camp of his young companions.

"Shell I—let 'em snooze! Time 'nough fer to roust 'em out ef that does turn out to be Jimmy Gee," he concluded, creeping cautiously down the hill and striking out for the river, at a point only a few rods above where the fire blazed up so merrily.

At that point he knew the water shoaled, so that, even by night, he might hope to effect a crossing without more than dampening his knees, where by daylight nature's stepping-stones were plenty enough to let one cross dry-shod.

Uncle Billy Breeze was not one to enter on an adventure half-heartedly, though he would hardly have undertaken this one had he not known how vain were his hopes of winning the boy hunters over to a speedy retreat from that land of disgust and disappointment.

"It's a chance, 'tanyrate! Ef it should turn out to be Jimmy Gee an' the critters—waal, I'm tryin' to hope that way."

By the time Uncle Billy reached the brink of the river, the fire had dwindled greatly, thus showing it must have fed on light, combustible stuff. There still remained a warm glow, however, and he hesitated for a few moments before fording the shallow stream, scanning the further shore as though more than half-suspecting an ambushade.

Not a sound came to his ear, save the faint rippling of waters and the indescribable hum of a summer's night. Not an object could he fix suspicion upon, and bending low over, he rapidly crossed the river.

One more halt he made, straining his ears intently, but still without hearing aught to alarm him, and then, stealthy as a panther creeping upon its sleeping prey, the scout entered the bushes, heading for the spot where the fire still glowed.

Ever wary, ever suspicious, Uncle Billy passed around so as to come upon the fire from a point directly opposite the river, reasoning that if it was really intended for a snare to entrap the

dismounted hunters, the danger would be greatest on the side nearest their camp.

Then—a truly horrifying scene burst upon his vision!

The fire was built of a wagon, now falling into ruins, with its load of goods.

And lying so close to the fire that his garments were beginning to char and smoke, was the ghastly corpse of an old, gray-haired man!

Near the opposite edge of the natural opening, lay a second figure, also motionless, seemingly dead.

Beyond those two, no other form or figure caught the startled eyes of the scout, and he began to believe that the dastardly murderers, who or whatever they might have been, had fled with their plunder during his long delay on the hill across the river.

"Mebbe yes an' mebbe no!" he muttered, drawing back and silently crawling around the opening, using his eyes and ears keenly. "Mebbe they're jest layin' back fer more wic-tims—double durn 'em!"

Not until he had completely encircled the little glade did Uncle Billy relinquish that possibility, but then he knew the assassins had indeed fled, leaving only the blazing wagon and those ghastly corpses as evidence behind them.

He passed out from cover, gently turning the old man over, sighing softly as he noted the terrible wound in his face, out of which blood and brains had oozed, forming a hideous mask.

"Dead—never knowed what hurted him!"

He passed around the glowing fire, and bent over the second figure, but he did not touch it. He could see where the deadly missile had pierced the skin almost directly in the center of the high forehead.

"A cool, stiddy hand pulled that trigger, anyway!" the old man mused, shivering as he cast a swift glance around him. "Plum' center! The pore lad never knowed what hurt him nuther!"

Uncle Billy made a brief tour of the spot, but he saw nothing to give him a positive clew to the perpetrators of that foul tragedy, and fearing to remain longer away from his post over the sleepy hunters, he left the glade and once more crossed the river.

"Jimmy Gee never done it—dead sure!" he reflected, darkly. "He mought shoot a man critter from ahind, but he never plugged one so dead center as that pore lad, face to face—no, he couldn't, the cur!"

"Steady, Billy!" came a low, guarded voice just in time to check the swiftly lifted muzzle. "It's only Curly!"

"Good Lawd!" gasped the old man, starting back, shivering at the memory of how narrowly he had escaped shooting a dear friend. "Why didn't ye holler out sooner when you want to slip an' stum'le chuck up inside a pore, onsuspectin' critter who'd ruther be—"

"Choked to death than give his clapper a moment's rest!" sharply interposed the young man. "What's going on over the river, Uncle Billy?"

"They ain't nothin'. Why ain't you 'sleep, honey?"

"Why ain't you on your post, vinegar?" laughed Curly. "How can a fellow be expected to sleep with no one to guard his precious scalp? But that isn't telling what you saw over yonder, Uncle Billy."

"Nothin'. Cross my heart ef they is, honey!" declared the old man, clutching an arm and trying to urge the other up the hill toward camp. "I jest dropped a match a'ter lightin' the pipe o' me, an' it ketched in the dry leaves."

"Now you're fibbing, Uncle Billy," wresting his arm free, and turning toward the ford. "I'm going over to investigate."

"Not alone, Curly," sharply said Breeze, gripping his arm, as he added: "We'll all go, ef you won't take my word fer it. We'll stick in a lump, the pile o' us. What comes to one must come to all."

"Then there is something over yonder?" persisted the young man, impressed by that unusually grave tone. "Black work, Uncle Billy? That was what the shootin' meant?"

"You hearn that, then?"

"It roused me up, but I hardly took it for more than a dream. Yet, somehow, I couldn't get to sleep again, and I thought I'd spell you for an hour or two."

"Then you didn't find me, o' course," nodded Uncle Billy, keeping firm hold of that arm, as he walked up the slope in the direction of the camp.

"Not until after I'd caught sight of that fire yonder," with a nod of his head across the river.

"I knew you must have gone that way to investigate, and so I struck for the ford, just in time to—"

"Mighty nigh git your everlastin'!" groaned the old man, shivering anew, as he recalled how narrowly he had escaped slaying one of his valuable charges. "'Pears like talkin' an' visin' won't never do ye no good, Curly. The older you git, the more keerless you grow, an' one o' these days—"

"What did you discover over yonder, Uncle Billy? What was that shooting about? What means that fire, eh?"

"Bloody murder—no less!"

"Jimmy Gee, or I'm 'way off!" ejaculated Curly, hand on revolver.

"Ef it was, he's 'way off long afore this," grunted Breeze, giving a different meaning to the same words. "But it's turrible—turrible to look on, Curly! Must we show it to the younkers?"

"They can stand it, if you can. They're pure Townsend, and you know what that stock means, Uncle Billy."

"Better never growed, an' only fer the bigness an' age, I couldn't tell 'em apart from Kunnel Jo an' Major Ed!"

Nothing more passed between the couple, until after the camp was gained and the sleeping lads were awakened.

At first Frank was inclined to be cross, even snappish, while even Will, usually so jolly, looked more like cursing than blessing those who had so ruthlessly broken in upon his happy dreams.

"I was just pulling my old horse from under Jimmy Gee, when you kicked up a row!" he muttered, sourly. "Why didn't you wait long enough for him to choke, anyway?"

But a very few words from Curly banished all such regrets from the brothers, and they sprung to their feet, looking to their weapons while listening to the brief explanation given by Uncle Billy.

"I ain't so mighty sure it's the work o' Jimmy Gee an' his pizen imps, mind ye," the veteran concluded. "It's a diff'runt sort o' job from hoss stealin', which jest 'bout bounds his ambition. But they's foul murder bin done, an' ef they's any show fer fetchin' the doers of it to justice, by markin' tha'r sign, why we ought fer to 'prove it."

"And run them to a rope if they've left trail enough to follow!" sternly flashed Frank Townsend, pushing past the loquacious veteran. "Talk enough! We're losing valuable time here."

Uncle Billy Breeze subsided, so far as talking was concerned, but he took the lead, as a right he had earned, and the young hunters followed silently in his tracks.

The river was reached without event worthy of note, and the crossing effected in silence. The fire still showed dully on the boughs of the trees, making it an easy task for all to locate the scene of that midnight tragedy.

"Hark!" hissed Uncle Billy, spreading out his arms to check the advance of those close behind him.

Then ahead came the low, indistinct sounds of a human tongue.

"We'll catch the bloody rascals!" grimly muttered Curly Clark, pushing forward. "Shoot 'em down, if a hand don't go up on the instant, boys!"

Uncle Billy Breeze smothered a groan of disgust in his throat as he found it impossible to hold his fiery young friends in check. He was all for strategy, they for bold action.

Yet even hot-headed Frank was wise enough to use great caution once they entered the bushes. If the foul assassins were really there, they would not hesitate about doing other murders to cover their initial crime.

In five minutes more the boy hunters were peering forth upon a truly pathetic scene; for Chincapin Dan, his face a mask of blood, was sitting by his father, holding his gray head to his breast, faintly begging him to wake up—to answer him, if only by a single word.

"He's crazy—poor fellow!" cried Frank, impulsively breaking cover and entering the circle of light.

"You done it—you murdered him—pore ole pap!" cried Dan, snatching up a rifle and leveling it at Frank's breast.

CHAPTER VII.

CURLY FINDS A PHOTOGRAPH.

"HOLD ON—you!" fairly screamed Uncle Billy Breeze as he saw that insane action, and only his marvelous activity and quick wit saved the life of Curly Temple.

One sweep of his sinewy arm flung the young

man off his balance, and a single cat-like leap carried him close enough to Chincapin Dan to enable him to knock up the muzzle of his rifle, even as it exploded.

Curly Temple felt the bullet brush his hair as he staggered under that friendly push, but luckily neither of his cousins stood in range behind him, and the lead spent its force on a sapling.

"He killed—pap—Elmy!" huskily panted the poor lad, falling across the corpse of his parent as Uncle Billy wrested the repeating rifle from his unnerved hands.

"Ef you've hurt ary one—boys?" cried Uncle Billy, his face showing ghastly white under the influence of intense emotion as he fearfully turned his gaze toward the hunters.

"We're all right—eh, Curly?"

"Don't hurt the poor fellow," hastily replied Clark, recovering his feet, having tripped over a twisted root. "Never touched a hair, and if he had, he's crazy—can't you see?"

"Pap—why don't you wake up? They's blood all over—look out, pap!" and Chincapin Dan lifted his head, to point with unsteady hand toward the bushes. "Thar's a man—he's goin' to bu'st a cap! Hold on!" leaping to his feet, his voice ringing out savagely. "Shoot me—not a pore old man that—ah-h!"

His hands closed upon his head, and he would have fallen in a heap only for the quick movements made by Uncle Billy Breeze.

"Stiddy—so!" muttered the old man as he gently lowered the wounded youth to the ground. "Pore critter! Shot plum' center, an' yit 'live 'nough fer to—glory to the ram!" his voice lifting in curiously mingled awe and relief as he took a bloody finger-tip from the face of the boy trailer.

"He isn't dead, then?" asked Frank Townsend, in softened tones as he drew nearer.

"Ef he ain't, he'd orter be, by rights. Ef he ain't, it wasn't 'long o' the pity o' him as pulled trigger onto him. Ef he ain't—waal, ef it ever comes to me wantin' to crack that same skull, be-durned ef I'll tackle the job ontel I kin git a cannon fer doin' of it with!"

"The lead glanced, then?" asked Curly Temple, bending curiously over the prostrate figure.

"Don't that look like it?" chuckled the veteran, a finger on each end of his extemporized probe; a slender twig, with a smooth bud on the tip which he first inserted in the wound.

The bullet had plowed its way from the center of Chincapin Dan's forehead, back and over his head, under the scalp, emerging fully six inches from where it had entered.

"Elmy—run fer kiver, an' I'll— Pap! look out!" moaned the injured lad, flinching unconsciously from the firm, but kindly touch, by means of which Uncle Billy hoped to prove no bones had been fractured by that dastardly shot.

"It's jest a clean, thoroughbred merri-cul!" declared the old man, with a long breath of relief. "Ef the pore critter don't die o' craziness 'long o' the shock, he'll be piert as ever inside o' two days!"

"You don't think he's lost his balance, Uncle Billy? He'll rally, after a bit, won't he?" asked Will, gazing into that blood-marked face with mingled pity and awe.

"Mebbe yes, an' mebbe no. 'I'll tell ye better when I've doctored him up a bit. Ef they was only a weenty sup o' whisky."

"There isn't a drop left?"

"Not even a smell to the cork—durn that Jimmy Gee!" growled Uncle Billy, casting a swift glance around the glade.

The name seemed to revive all his old fears for his young companions, and only for his recent experience, he would have urged them to take to cover with their weapons, lest harm come to them from the enemy who had brought them so much trouble already.

"All eyes open, lads!" he compromised, warningly. "Mebbe they'll be fer comin' back to see ef they kin work any more devilment, an'—"

"Hardly, after using the torch," quietly interposed Curly Temple.

"But you'll blot out all o' the sign—"

"That poor fellow can tell us far plainer. Look after him, Uncle Billy, and trust us not to play the fool."

"Good Lawd!" inwardly groaned the veteran, as he once more turned to the wounded youth. "An' him sca'ely able fer to raise peach-down onto the lips o' him! An' me old 'nough fer to—stiddy, honey!" with abrupt change to gentle force as Chincapin Dan made another blind effort to spring to his feet and fight with his imaginary enemies.

Will Townsend caught up a battered tin can from near the camp-fire, and hastened with it to

the river, returning with water. Uncle Billy used this, cleansing the ugly wound and bandaging it with a handkerchief sacrificed by Will for the purpose.

Another trip to the shore procured water enough to quench the raging thirst which had seized the wounded youth, and after a little, that pitiful, hunted, crazy light faded from his eyes.

"Stiddy, honey," gently muttered Uncle Billy, smiling blandly into that haggard face. "You're right as a top, but you'll be heap sight more righter ef you'll jest shet the two eyes o' ye, an' try fer to ketch forty winks fer a bit or so—'deed ye jest will, honey, now!"

"Elmy—sister—whar is she?" slowly uttered Chincapin Dan, trying to look around him, but his eyes checking with a shiver as they fell upon that ghastly corpse. "Pap—they killed him!"

His muscles relaxed, his head drooped heavily, and as Uncle Billy suffered him to lie at length on the ground, his own face became the perfect picture of utter disgust.

"Kick me, Will—kick me fer a blame' ole fool! Kick me wu'ss then a crazy mule liftin' frozen punkins up a hill! Me, 'tendin' fer to be half-white an' full senses, lettin' sech a sight wait fer to ketch the two eyes o' him—an' he nigh crazy afore it!"

With a degree of strength hardly to be expected in one of his build, Uncle Billy picked up the corpse of Todd Dickerman in his arms and bore it unaided to a clump of bushes, beyond the range of Chincapin Dan's eyes should his senses be restored to him once more.

Will waited by the wounded lad until Uncle Billy returned, then he joined Frank and Curly, a sorely troubled light in his honest eyes.

"Do you know, boys, there must have been another—a girl!" he muttered, nervously sweeping his eyes around the edge of the clearing. "He spoke of Elmy, and called her sister."

"I was afraid of it!" said Curly, his handsome face showing pale and stern-set, as he held out a hand, in which lay a small card-sized photograph. "I found this, a bit ago, and I saw where a small shoe had left a print in the soft earth, over yonder."

With natural curiosity the brothers gazed at the pictured face, but neither of them were prepared to see such a charming, lovely image, after noting the faces of the two men found in the glade.

"His sister!" exclaimed Frank, bending over the card, then lifting his wondering eyes. "It can't be! He's plain as—"

Curly Temple turned the card over, showing the words, written in a neat, flowing hand:

"How do you like

"ELMA?"

Before either of the brothers could say more, Uncle Billy came up, peering curiously at the photograph as he said:

"He's sleepin', jest now, an' ef he don't git no more sech turrible skeers, I do reckon he'll wake up plenty able fer to tell us jest how all this devilment come about. But, not to lose so much time, ef you boys'll sorter set by him to watch a bit, mebbe I kin pick up a sign or two that'll give us a weenty hint. Eh?"

"I'll watch over the poor fellow," quickly said Curly Temple, that photograph slipping into the bosom of his shirt. "Take the boys with you, Uncle Billy, and give them another lesson in woodcraft."

Without waiting for a reply, the young man moved away, squatting down beside Chincapin Dan, who really seemed buried in a peaceful sleep.

And with that lovely face indelibly imprinted on his brain, Curly Temple gazed long and curiously into that haggard countenance before him, seeking to trace a resemblance between the two, such as ought to mark brother and sister.

Apart from tan and a few freckles, and ignoring the sun-burnt hair, he saw a fairly good-looking face, with clear-cut features; but that was all.

"She looks far more like Frank—by the big moon!"

Curly almost cried aloud and sprung to his feet at the thought. Why had he not noticed it before?

His hand fairly trembled as he took the picture from his bosom, and held it so that the ruddy glow from the fire fell across the card.

It was true! With only the difference of sex and a year or two, Frank Townsend might almost have sat for that very picture.

"Elmy—whar is she, stranger?" faintly asked

Chincapin Dan, his gray eyes opening, his haggard face twitching painfully, but with none of that crazy wildness which had marked him until then.

"Don't—lie still, poor fellow," soothingly uttered Curly, with a gentle force restraining the youth from rising. "You have been badly injured, and—"

"I know. I ketched a glimp' o' the critter jest as he pulled. I was goin' to help pap—You wasn't one o' the cussed gang, stranger?"

"No; I'm your true friend, if you'll let me claim that title," replied Curly, slipping the card into his pocket. "Don't try to talk—"

"I got to," frowned Dan, brushing that restraining hand aside with a strength hardly to be expected from one in his condition. "I ain't a kid. I ain't a baby. I'm a man now—an' they's them that murdered pap an' stole off Elmy— They *did* steal her, stranger?" with sudden softness coming into his voice, a pleading light into his eyes. "They didn't—they couldn't hev the heart to—to hurt such as Elmy?"

"Stiddy, lad!" cried Uncle Billy, attracted by the sound of voices, and scowling ferociously into the face of Curly Temple. "Didn't I ax would you keep him snoozin' sounder then a—Good Lawd!"

Chincapin Dan rose to his feet, a hand pressed tightly to his painfully throbbing temples as he gazed around the little glade. He shivered like a leaf as he noted the little pool of blood which marked the spot where his father had fallen, and then, as though guided by instinct, he staggered over to where Uncle Billy had placed the corpse, though it was hidden from his sight where he stood.

"It'll knock him clean eendways," groaned the old man, yet refraining from arresting the youth. "Waal, ef it kills, mebbe it'll be best!"

Chincapin Dan sunk down by the side of his murdered parent, bending over him, and gently smoothing the white hair and beard, now dabbled in blood and mingled with leaves and dust.

"I couldn't help it, pap," he muttered, brokenly, great tears running from his wistful eyes. "They ketched me when I was sleepin'. An' when I *did* woke up—they was a black-haired critter jest bu'stin' a cap onto me!"

"Let him went," hastily whispered Uncle Billy, holding back Curly Temple, and signing the brothers to keep silent. "It'll kill or cure!"

Subdued though his tones were, Chincapin Dan looked around with a wan smile flitting across his face as he brushed the tears from his eyes before muttering:

"I'm cryin', ain't I, strangers? Waal, he was my dad—the only pap I ever knowed, ye see. An' ef he was hard, an' rough, an' hot-headed, times, reckon I deserved all I got. He was my pap—an' now he's gone clean off! They butchered him—like you mought a hongry wolf! I see him pitch on his face— Pap, oh, pap!"

CHAPTER VIII.

AND RESOLVES TO FIND THE ORIGINAL.

POWERFULLY affected by that barely articulate grief, Uncle Billy and the boys withdrew a few paces, yet not so far but what they could speedily gain the side of the wounded youth in case he should need their services.

For many minutes Chincapin Dan mourned over the corpse of his father, for the time being seeming to have forgotten Elma and her probable fate. But then, worn out by his grief and his hurts combined, he lay beside the body and fell into a heavy sleep.

Cautiously, making no sound to break that slumber, Uncle Billy removed the corpse, and aided by the boys, dug a shallow grave on the bank of the river, hiding the body from mortal view before the gray of dawn proclaimed the birth of a new day.

Leaving the boys to prepare such food as they could afford, Uncle Billy carefully and thoroughly scouted around the place, looking for sign and reading it far more accurately than he could a printed page.

"They was a powerful pack o' the wolves, fer sech a small haul," he finally reported. "More'n twenty, from the buff-marks."

"And one set belonging to Curly, by rights!" grimly nodded Frank.

"Waal, I ain't sayin' that," hesitated Uncle Billy, his little eyes drooping quickly and something like a flush tinging his cheeks.

"I am. I saw them plainly. Jimmy Gee had a finger in the pie, if it wasn't all his making. I'm going to pick out mine, after grub."

Uncle Billy shifted uneasily as he might had he chosen an active ant-bill for a seat, but he was spared the necessity of replying to this

uncomfortably significant speech by the approach of Chincapin Dan.

Curly Temple instantly sprung up and met the wounded youth with frank hands.

"Not a word until you've eaten a bite, friend," he said, leading Dan to a seat and placing before him a choice bit of hot meat. "Swallow that, and then we'll talk business to you, partner."

"Ef it chokes me, sir," nodded Dan, his eyes growing very misty. "I hain't fergot—I see you all last night. You was kind to me—nd to pap," with a gulp that was almost a sob.

He seemed ashamed of betraying even so much emotion, and squatting down on his heels he ate the food furnished him. At the same time he fought down his natural emotions, and when the hasty meal was ended, he looked and spoke more like the Chincapin Dan of old, before that terrible blow was dealt him.

"You hain't seen nothin' of Elmy—my sister, stranger?"

"I found this," and Curly Temple extended the photograph, something like regret flitting across his handsome face as the card was snatched from his hand and pressed to Dan's lips.

"She was my only sister, ye see," he muttered, apologetically. "She sent this to me 'way back when she was off to school. They was her name writ' outo the back o' the keerd. I must 'a' lost it last night when I was shot. An'—you never see her, then?"

Curly Temple hastened to explain the part their party had taken in the events of the past night. Chincapin Dan listened quietly, only his glittering eyes betraying the passion raging in his heart the while.

"You kivered pap up, an' I thank ye fer so much," he said, speaking in a curiously still, strained voice. "I'll thank ye over ag'in ef you'll tell me jest whar to find his grave. I'd kinder like to know whar to look fer him when I git back. An' Elmy—mebbe she'd keer, too. Fer he was softer, like, when Elmy was nigh, an' he set a powerful store by her good looks an' her p'arin'. She 'peared 'way up over us both; in natur' it hed to be that way ye know, sence nuther pap nor me knowed much—we was jest common truck 'side o' Elmy."

"An' ef we're to git her back, the quicker we pull-foot fer Texas an' Kunnel Jo the better!" briskly cried Uncle Billy leaping to his feet and handling his repeater.

"Good-by, Billy Breeze," coolly nodded Temple.

"But, durn it all, boy!" spluttered the veteran, scowling.

"Just tell Colonel Jo that he'll find us on the trail, unless we have caught up with the procession, will you, Billy Breeze?"

"Good Lawd!" fairly howled the old fellow, dashing his hat to the ground and stamping upon it in fury. "Don't I tell ye they's more'n a couple or two hundred o' the pesky imps?"

"Why didn't you bring a fine-tooth comb with you, then?" laughed Will Townsend, maliciously twisting the sentence awry. "Keep on dancing like that for a few minutes, and there'll be mighty few get out of the cage alive, Uncle Billy!"

"Ef I was as sharp as you think you be!" with a bow to Will. "Or as smart as you reckon you be!" bending almost double before Curly. "Or ef I was hafe the double durn an' twisted fool that I know I be fer ever mixin' up in sech a p'izen, ornary, bull-headed, contrary gang as this, billy-be-jumped-all-over ef I wouldn't kick my p'izen brains clean out—jest so!"

And with a muffled howl of fury the old man began hopping over the ground, at each jump kicking himself with vicious energy.

It was a ridiculous exhibition, and even Chincapin Dan smiled for an instant, despite his sore heart, while the others fairly roared with amusement.

"Fun, ain't it?" snapped Uncle Billy, brushing the sweat from his heated brows as he paused to glare at the boy hunters. "Looks mighty lifelike fer to see 'nother durn idjit playin' the fool, don't it? An' they's jest this diffrunce. I'm playin' the fool beca'se I'm mad, an' others is playin' the durn fool beca'se they was borned that way!"

Snatching up his rifle, the angry old fellow strode off, leaving the boys together.

Curly Temple, grave enough now, but with sympathy in every tone of his voice, turned to Chincapin Dan and began questioning him about the past, frankly admitting his desire to learn what had brought them to such a wild and desolate region.

Chincapin Dan cast a wistful glance around him, plainly longing to be at work, but after the great kindness he had received at those hands, he could not refuse to gratify that natural desire, so far as lay in his power.

That was only in part, since Todd Dickerman had kept even him in the dark as to the real reasons for that hurried, perilous trip.

All he knew with certainty was that from the very day of their abandoning their cozy if humble home in Kansas, through all that weary journey, Todd Dickerman seemed haunted by a fear of worse than death.

"He wasn't runnin' 'way from the law, mind ye, though. I know 'nough to be dead sure o' so much. But he 'peared to look fer some terrible inemy in every bush an' every holler, an' behind every tree or rock the road through. I never knew what it could be, but it come onto us last night."

"You said something about catching a glimpse of a man's face looking at you over a rifle, just before you were shot down. Would you recognize that face if ever you came across it again?" asked Temple.

"Quicker'n I'd know my own in still water!" flashed Chincapin Dan, his haggard face lighting up with a look so deadly, so vengeful, that even stout-hearted Curly Temple involuntarily shrunk from him. "An' I'll meet it ag'in—ef I have to wade clean through hell to git thar!"

Without a trace of weakness remaining, Chincapin Dan caught up his Winchester repeater and strode away from the spot, quickly finding the tracks left behind by his enemies, bending over and reading them as swiftly and as accurately as could Uncle Billy Breeze himself.

That worthy came back as Chincapin Dan left, his honest face full of keen anxiety, as he glanced from face to face, almost frowning as his eyes lingered on the bold, handsome features of the eldest.

"You ain't dead sot onto sech a fool trick, Curly?" he ventured at length. "Now Jimmy Gee hes j'ined up 'long of a bigger gang o' imps as black as his own self, you won't hold out ag'in' makin' short cut back to Kunnel Jo, fer help?"

"Without horses, that trip would take us full a fortnight, Uncle Billy, not to count the return trip," was the cold response. "At the end of that time where would Jimmy Gee be? Where would the trail be? And you're leaving the poor young lady entirely out of the question. Where would *she* be, and what might be her fate?"

"They's all of twenty imps in the gang!"

"Too many to fight in the open, of course!" laughed Curly, his blue eyes glowing vividly.

"But we can work from under cover, if we have to. And being so strong, may prove their very weakness. They'll hardly suspect so small a force of following them, and we can catch them off guard so much the more easily—don't you see?"

"I cain't see no furdur'n this," doggedly said Uncle Billy Breeze, tapping a bony finger into a skinny palm the while. "Kunnel Jo said I was to look over ye. Kunnel Jo said I was to keep ye from playin' the durn fool. Kunnel Jo said he'd hold me 'countable fer fetchin' of ye all safe back ag'in. An' Kunnel Jo said he'd tan the hide o' me fer to make a bull-whip ef I slipped up on ary one o' them p'int's. Now I ax ye plain, didn't he say jest them words?"

"Of course he did, and of course he meant to make the threat good if you drooped tail and crept back to him with a howl about our acting clean white," laughed Curly Temple, easily, but with a dogged determination underlying that affected carelessness. "Your only show is to climb a tree and watch how we come out. Then, if we get downed, just pull the tree up after you, and pray that Colonel Jo never finds out how you chose to do your overlooking!"

"Which is to say that you 'lows to follow the trail?"

"I do, but I'm only speaking for myself, of course. Frank and Will are their own masters, now Colonel Jo is out of sight."

"Our nags went with the gang, didn't they, Uncle Billy?" asked Frank, quietly.

Though reluctantly, the veteran nodded assent.

"That points out the way my toes are turned then."

"We settled that all before; why kick up such a blessed bobbery over it at every halt, Uncle Billy?" lazily drawled Will. "It makes me tired to walk. I never knew but one nag that didn't make me worse tired to ride. He's gone with the gang. I'm going after him."

Curly Temple was hastily scribbling something on a blank page of his notebook, and as Will ceased speaking with another yawn, he tore out the leaf and handed it to the old man, saying gravely:

"Keep that, Uncle Billy, and show it to Colonel Jo if you have to go back without any of us. It simply states that we refuse to listen to your good advice, and that you are in no sense to blame for what we brought upon our own heads."

"An' ef you git downed—ef one, or two, or all three both o' ye git downed, I'm ef I go this to Kunnel Jo. Is that it, Curly?" slowly asked the veteran, fingering the bit of paper as though afraid it might bite him.

"Right as a string, Uncle Billy," gravely bowed the young man.

"Then—thar's your durned ole paper!" flashed the old man, tearing it into tiny bits and grinding the fragments under his heel. "Fer ef I go back, I go back as I come, with three o' the durndest, contrairy-est, bull-headest young rips o' p'izen cussedness that was ever whelped! An' ef they don't all go back, then I don't go back nuther!"

Curly broke into a genial laugh, gripping Uncle Billy by the hand and smiling mischievously into his indignant face as he said:

"Don't I know that, you jolly old humbug? Don't we all know you'd die a thousand times over rather than desert us, let us be never so big fools? But I had to bring you to the rack, for time is precious, and no less heroic dose could even begin to faze you!"

"All the same, it's a fool trick!"

"It's a solemn duty, Uncle Billy," and Curly grew grave. "We'd be worse than heathen were we to leave that poor girl in such evil hands!"

CHAPTER IX.

WOOLING BY PROXY.

"WELL, pretty, almost wore through that precious fit of sulks?"

Wilder Hawkings uttered the words while standing in front of a rude but fairly comfortable brush hut, and they were addressed to Elma Dickerman, for whose immediate accommodation the primitive shelter had been constructed.

The maiden was fully dressed, for though several days had passed since that dastardly attack on the night camp, she had never once removed her garments or entirely lost herself in slumber.

She showed the effects of this in both face and figure, yet she looked charming enough to those cruelly keen eyes that mocked at her sudden start and shiver of fear.

"Because if you have, I reckon it's about time you and I were coming to some understanding," nodded the villain, crossing his legs as he rested a shoulder against the sapling forming one side of the doorway.

"Why do you persecute me?"

"Well, partly because you can't persecute me," laughed the ruffian. "Partly because I owe your people a powerful hefty grudge that—"

"They are dead—you murdered them!"

There were tears in her voice as those words broke from Elma's lips, but none in her flashing, vengeful eyes. Her little hands clinched tightly, and if a deadly weapon had been within her reach, Wilder Hawkings would surely have paid the full penalty of his crimes.

"You say I did?" drawled Wild Hawk, a glow of admiration leaping into his evil eyes. "Then of course I must have done so, though I was under the impression that your people were far away from here—many a long mile from the spot where I caught up with old man Dickerman."

He saw Elma start, and he noted the flash of memory that came into her eyes, as well as the creeping of a hand toward her bosom.

"Forgot, didn't you?" with a short, ugly laugh, as he drew his figure erect. "The old rascal *did* tell you something, then, before he jumped the river? Well, that settles it; you've got to learn a bit more of the truth, my dainty hummingbird!"

"Back, or I'll screech for help!" cried Elma, shrinking to the rear wall of her little hut as the outlaw crossed its threshold.

"With empty echo to answer you, silly?" sneered Wild Hawk. "Think any of my bully lads would be fools enough to chip in while I'm running the game?"

"They are men, and would not stand by to see a lady abused!"

"No, they'd sit down and shut their eyes," mocked the villain, seeming to enjoy the vain struggles of that helpless one for a brief space; but then he abruptly changed both tone and

manner, speaking coldly and with grim decision:

"Nonsense apart, Elma, it's high time you learned just what position you hold here, and at least an idea of what awaits you in the near future. Will you listen quietly, or shall I force you to hearken?"

"Don't touch me—anything but that!" panted the maiden, shrinking away as the outlaw drew nearer.

Wild Hawk lifted both hands and turned them over as he gazed sneeringly upon them.

"Is it because they've shed human blood, lady dainty? You'd ought to thank me for taking at least one bath in scarlet, and maybe you will when you've heard all I have to tell you about Todd Dickerman and his little didoes of the past score years, more or less."

"Nothing you can say—"

"Not even when I tell you how he broke your lady mother's heart by kidnapping her children?" sneered Wild Hawk.

"He never—he was only an unwilling tool!" flashed Elma, just indignation overwhelming her personal fears. "Some other—you were the very villain, Wilder Hawkings!"

"I want to know! Did Toddy tell you all that?" mocked the rascal, though a venomous glitter leaped into his black eyes. "Wish I'd known as much before I spoiled his beautiful figure-head, back yon!"

"You admit that you murdered him?"

"I own up to killing the old scoundrel, yes," nodded Hawkings. "As to murder—well, crushing a rattler isn't murder, nor is shooting a fugitive from justice, if he resists arrest."

"He was fleeing from you, not from the law, Wilder Hawkings!"

With a swift movement, Wild Hawk caught Elma's right hand and drew it through his arm, turning toward the entrance as he coldly said:

"You need a bit of fresh air, Elma, and I'm proud to act as your escort. And while we enjoy it, I'll try to remove some of those ridiculous notions from that pretty noddle of yours."

For a single breath the poor girl hung back, but then, realizing how helpless she was to resist that powerful man, and fearing to bring even worse upon her own head, she yielded. Together they left the hut, and passed out into the clear, lovely day.

Elma noticed a number of roughly clad, heavily armed men lying around in careless security, and cast longing glances at the horses staked out hard by.

"Think you'd enjoy a ride better than a walk?" laughed Wilder Hawkings, seemingly able to read her inmost thoughts with ease. "Well, Elma, if you act like a sensible girl should, that pleasure shall be yours before many more suns come and go."

He passed on beyond earshot of any of his lounging men, then came to a pause in a pleasant spot, motioning Elma to a seat on a fallen tree, taking a stone lying opposite for himself.

"Good enough!" with a nod of approval, as the maiden silently complied. "Unless the lad hurries up his cakes, I'll have you pretty thoroughly tamed for him before he gets here!"

"What lad? What do you mean?" Elma forced herself to ask, calmly.

"Your dutiful that-is-to-be, of course," nodded Wild Hawk. "The gallant bridegroom for whose arrival we are waiting so patiently. Only that I feel sure he has a perfect excuse, I'd begin to grow angry at his being so far behind time."

"And the bride?" demanded Elma, pale as death, but with eyes that gained fire with each passing moment.

"Will be on time, of course," laughed Wild Hawk. "Did you ever hear of one who kept a wedding-party waiting of her own free will? But let that go, for now; I've other matter to talk over with you."

"A little bit ago, something was said about murder, and kidnapping, and breaking hearts; but I only turned the title-page, to catch your wandering eye. Now I'll lay the whole story bare for your benefit, little lady."

"First, you must have felt that Todd Dickerman was not your real father?"

"What do you know of that?" and as she spoke Elma once more instinctively lifted a hand to her bosom where that package given her by the murdered refugee only a few hours before his death, still nestled.

Again those keen eyes noted the gesture, and though he seemingly passed it over, it was not without a mental note being recorded.

"Well, possibly not quite so much as I expect to learn before the moon falls again, but quite enough to say that not a drop of Dickerman blood flows in your veins. Just where that

warm current started I can give a mighty shrewd guess, but it's blunt facts that count most in a game of this nature."

"You stole me from my parents!"

"So you asserted once before," laughed Wild Hawk, coolly. "Stick to it long enough, and perhaps you'll get me over to the same notion."

"Dare you deny it?"

"Don't dare me, pretty. On a dare I'd deny that I ever drew the breath of life; I'd deny that there was a sun shining up yonder; I'd even go so far as to deny that you're a precious, dainty, sweet and most lovable morsel! Further than that, vivid imagination can't climb!"

Elma shivered and lapsed into silence. This mood was even worse and more to be dreaded than his hot rage or bitter malice.

"That's sober truth, pretty, but it isn't just the business for which I coaxed you out of your retreat," added Wilder Hawkings, in a less offensive tone. "What I wanted to do first was to explain why I have taken so much trouble to run down Todd Dickerman."

"He was a thoroughbred rascal, from 'way back. He held a hot grudge against your people, and being too cowardly to take it out, face to face, man to man, he watched his chance and stole you, then a kid, just able to talk and walk and be amusing in your motherly devotion to your dolls—wasn't it?"

"To my brother!" flashed Elma, her eyes once more aglow. "I had one—he was stolen at the same time! And you—you murdered him—poor, dear Danny!"

Wild Hawk gazed at her, wide-eyed, until she uttered that name, then broke into a harsh laugh, his lips curling with scorn.

"Chincapin Dan, do you mean? Bah!" flinging out a hand in contempt. "The spawn of old Dickerman and his drunken maniac of a wife! Your brother?"

"He was—I know it!" sobbed Elma, half-angrily.

"That settles it, then, and we'll pass the point for the present. Say you've lost a brother: I'll put a closer and dearer tie in his stead, and when you come to know my lad—my gallant Bruno—you will be free to own up he's worth a whole regiment of Chincapins."

"What is your Bruno to me?"

"Not near so much as he will be, within a week, pretty," laughed Wild Hawk. "The handsome rascal is taking his time; he ought to have been here two days ago; but then, you see, he's never laid eyes on the dainty darling I've picked out as his wife."

"You villain!" flashed Elma, her hot indignation drying the tears in her eyes like magic. "I'd sooner die a thousand deaths than to wed with one whom such as you can claim as kin! You—with your hands still reddened by the blood of my father and brother!"

"You might go further, and pick up a mighty sight crookeder stick than Bruno, pretty," drawled the villain, unmoved by her impetuous words. "If I say it myself, there isn't a finer, handsomer, more dashing lad in the States than Bruno. You'd say as much, too, if you wouldn't pull the wool of prejudice over those bright eyes. You will say as much, before you've been Bruno's wife one little week."

"Was it for this you killed my father and brother?" asked Elma, with a calmness so far from natural that it ought to have alarmed even that crime-hardened villain.

Although he saw it not, Elma cast more than one desperate glance at the pistols hanging at his hips, the polished handles rising above the spring-scabbards, seemingly so easy to snatch forth.

"Just for that, letting pass the mistake as to kindred," nodded Hawkings. "If I'm correct as to your real parentage, you are this minute one of the richest heiresses on record!"

Elma started, her face briefly flushing. Even in her position, such an announcement could not be heard without a degree of emotion far from unpleasant.

"If I am so rich—if I am an heiress, I ought to be able to pay you well for setting me at liberty. Name your price, and I'll promise to pay it—out of the fortune you say I'm entitled to!"

Again Wild Hawk laughed, this time mockingly, as he gazed through partly-closed lids into that beautiful face.

"Why take part, when we can even more surely win the whole, with a dainty bride flung in to make good measure, pretty?"

"That will never come to pass!"

"Yes, it will. Bruno is on his way here with a priest or parson to do the splicing. He ought to have been here first, the lazy rascal!" with a sudden frown, half of anger, half of uneasiness.

"If he don't show up soon I'll feel tempted to step into his shoes myself!"

"Why not?" starting erect and coming closer, his eyes aglow. "I'm as good or better than—"

He stopped short, flinching with a smothered curse.

For Elma snatched a revolver from his waist, cocking and thrusting it almost against his breast as she pulled trigger.

CHAPTER X.

RAPPING JIMMY GEE'S KNUCKLES.

It seemed that nothing short of a miracle could save the life of Wilder Hawkings, then, but he was not to die thus nor there.

With a whizzing sound, some glittering object came flashing through the air, striking the weapon fairly, knocking it from the hand of the half-crazed maiden, even as the hammer fell and the cartridge exploded.

Wild Hawk uttered a snarling cry, flinching swiftly as he felt the lead tear through the skin at his side, then his strong hands closed on the poor girl, swinging her clear of the ground, seeming about to dash her savagely against the fallen tree.

"Don't—it'd bu'st the game wide open, pard!" cried a shrill, peculiar voice, and Jimmy Gee ran forward, gesticulating madly.

Either that or sober second thoughts prevailed over madness, for Wild Hawk lowered Elma to her feet, laughing grimly as he drew her toward the little brush hut once more.

"You wanted to be in fashion and wear red gloves, too, did ye?" he laughed, harshly, as he thrust the panting girl through the opening.

"You murdered my kindred!"

"And you thought to get even by killing me? Well, you've had your chance, and botched it. I'll take mighty good care you don't have another. You, Jimpsey!"

"Right on hand, boss!" promptly answered one of his men, running toward the hut.

"Get a bit of rope and tie the girl. She's entirely too free with her fingers."

With a covert grin the burly ruffian obeyed, Elma making no resistance after a quick glance around convinced her that escape by desperate flight was out of the question, just then.

She was glad to sink down upon her rude couch, as soon as Jimpsey completed his task. Now that she had dared and failed, her heart grew sick and faint within her. Though she knew that her insulter richly deserved death, she shivered as she thought of how narrowly she had escaped from having a human life upon her hands.

"Ain't hit hard, be ye, pardner?" softly ventured Jimmy Gee, nodding toward the widening stain of red that marked the garments over the track of the bullet. "I throwed the knife mighty sudden, but I didn't hev time fer to git thar any quicker."

"Your knife, was it?" asked Wild Hawk, one hand gingerly feeling of his ribs, but his glittering eyes fixed on that foxy face. "Then I reckon you were trying to hear what he were talking about?"

"Deed I never did!" expostulated Jimmy Gee, shrinking back with a scared look in his yellow eyes. "I jest happened by."

"A lucky happen for me," grimly laughed the outlaw, as he turned away from the hut, signing Jimpsey to stand on guard by the opening. "She took me clean off guard. Only for you I'd have got it, plump!"

"Pards is pards, an' seein' a pard in sech a tight box, I hed to take the resk o' nippin' her fingers," chuckled Jimmy Gee, rallying. "'Course they wouldn't 'a' bin a mite o' resk ef I'd hed time fer to ketch a steady-myself, but that they wasn't—not any!"

"A second lost—well, it's over with now!"

"Jest barked ye, didn't it?" grinned Jimmy Gee, as Wild Hawk bared his side to inspect the hurt.

The lead had done but little more than tear through the skin for an inch or two, not burying itself more than half its own diameter. The blood was flowing quite freely, but with that once checked, the wound would give Hawkings no trouble after a day or so.

Eager to deepen the sense of obligation which the other would naturally feel, Jimmy Gee busied himself in stopping the flow of blood, neatly bandaging the wound afterward.

"You'll hev to look on both sides in the mornin' afore you kin tell which one got bit," he chuckled, when his self-appointed duty was at an end. "An' now I reckon I kin go look fer my toad-sticker. I was so mighty bad skeered fer fear you was hit deep, that I never tuck time fer to even think o' it afore!"

"You would have mourned bitterly over my corpus, wouldn't you, Jimmy?" dryly asked the chief, as they retraced their steps to the point where his evil career had so nearly found an ending.

"Ain't you my pardner?" reproachfully uttered Jimmy Gee, looking up to the face of the other as he stooped to pick up his knife.

"Well, hardly so bad as that," bluntly retorted Hawkings. "Some of my men occasionally stoop so low as to run off a herd of hoofs or horns, but they always make it a point to take a thorough bath before they show themselves in my presence after. Now you—you were born with a halter in your fist, I verily believe, Jimmy Gee!"

"Better in my fist then 'bout my neck!" muttered the fox, sourly.

"One naturally follows the other in these parts, and it's only a question of time. But let that drop. What were you spying on us for, Jimmy Gee?"

"I wasn't—"

"You lie!" flashed Wild Hawk, gripping the rascal by the throat, and giving him a vicious shake before unclosing his fingers. "Out with the truth if it splits your throat! What were you spying on us for?"

"I jest wanted to know— Durn it all!" with feeble passion as he shot a covert glance into that stern face. "Ain't we pardners? Ain't I in the game, to win or lose? Didn't I do my sheer back yen? Then you cain't in decency throw off on me like this—no you cain't, now!"

"Is that all?" coldly asked Hawkings, smiling so as to show a gleam of white through his jetty mustache.

"Didn't I find that bun'le o' papers, or sech they might be?" desperately argued Jimmy Gee, going in overhead now that the ice was fairly broken. "An' wasn't I bloody durn idjit 'nough fer to tell you 'bout 'em, even afore I'd tuck the trouble to look 'em over?"

"As an honest man you could do no less, Jimmy Gee," nodded Wild Hawk. "The package bore the young lady's name, and was sealed. Of course neither you nor I had any right to retain the package. I gave it to Miss Dickerman as soon as she returned to her senses, and doubtless she has it now in her possession."

Jimmy Gee abruptly averted his head, shuffling toward the revolver which his knife had torn from Elma's grasp, as a convenient excuse. He feared lest those keen eyes should read his face too truly, just then.

"Jest a notch, pardner, fer to 'mind ye that a true pard saved ye from being drilled through an' through," he grinned, finger on a nick in the frame as he extended the pistol toward its owner.

But instead of taking the weapon, Wilder Hawkings sprang past the foxy rascal, quickly picking up a small package and slipping it into his bosom; yet not so quickly that Jimmy Gee failed to see and recognize it.

It was the package given Elma by Todd Dickerman, only a short time before he fell dead to the crack of the assassin's rifle.

No doubt it had been shaken from its resting-place in her bosom, when Wild Hawk wrested her from her feet, after that desperate attempt to avenge her wrongs.

Jimmy Gee drooped his eyes, but not swiftly enough to escape the vigilance of Wild Hawk.

"She dropped it when I held her over the tree, I reckon," he said, quietly. "I'll give it back to her presently. You were saying—yes, I see," taking the pistol and rubbing the notch with a thumb nail. "You have cut a nick for my life, Jimmy, but that's better than one for my death."

"As ef I would!" spluttered Jimmy Gee, with a vast show of honest indignation. "Ain't we pards? Ain't we both into the same big game? An' ain't I done my sheer o' what's past, while holdin' ready to do my sheer o' what's still to come?"

"Still harping on the old string, I see," with a short, ugly laugh as he took a seat on the tree-trunk, playing idly with his recovered pistol. "Do you know, Jimmy, you make me think of a bot-fly?"

"I cannot see why I should," with a sulky grimace.

"Because you'll never take a hint to leave. Because you may hit at a bot-fly, time and time over again. You may knock it down, as it buzzes past, but if it isn't killed, or stunned so you can put a foot on it before it can get up, back it comes, buzzing worse than ever, shooting out its tail and sticking nasty eggs on every hair. And the only way you can get shut of it is to—kill it, cold, Jimmy Gee!"

"A body'd think I hedn't any rights—"

"To play the bot-fly, Jimmy?" interposed Hawkings, showing his teeth wickedly. "Of course you have, if you grant others the right to smash you as an infernal nuisance."

"Didn't you say ef I'd j'ine in an' lend a han' with them critters back yen, that I'd come in fer a sheer of the plunder?" desperately persisted the foxy rascal.

"Didn't you declare that all you wanted was four horses to fill out your bunch?" retorted Hawkings. "Well, you got your horses. You sent them off with your rascals. If you had kept them company, there wouldn't have been the ghost of a racket between you and me, Jimmy."

"Ef I hed gone, whar'd you be now?" pointing the query by a nod toward the notched revolver.

"Dead, perhaps, but it would have come all in a lump: I wouldn't be talked to death. Nor will I!" with sudden rancor in voice and eyes as he continued: "Look you, Jimmy Gee, and mark my words well."

"My men don't like you. They wear a different feather, and the two breeds refuse to mix. Of course they would hold their noses and suffer in silence if I gave the sign, but that I don't care to do."

"I savor you even less than they can. I'm tired of hearing your cracked bazoo, and worse wearied of seeing you dogging my heels. If you hadn't saved me from an ugly hurt a bit ago, I'd simply turn you over to my wild hawks, and bid them see which could tear out the biggest beak-full. As it is—you want to pull out for a healthier climate."

"Then—I ain't to get no sheer in what the gal fetches?" whined the covetous rascal, even while shrinking from that stern gaze.

"A rope, knife or bullet; take your choice, Jimmy Gee," curtly said Hawkings, rising: his feet and slipping the pistol into its scabbard.

"You kick me out, then? Cain't I even time to ketch breath?"

"How much time do you ask?"

"It's go, dead sure, boss?" pleaded the wretch even yet clinging to hope, though he must have known it was worse than folly, because more dangerous.

"It's one of two things: you leave us of your own free will, armed and mounted as you joined us, taking with you the bits of plunder you nipped before setting Todd Dickerman's wag on fire. Or—you go out with a rope about your heels, bait for the buzzards as soon as the who drags you at the tail of his horse sees fit cast you off."

"Now you see the two trails; pick the that best fits your own fancy, Jimmy Gee."

"I'll go—'course I'll go on my own foot, boss," cringed the foxy rascal, his eyes downcast, more to hide the ugly light that filled than in fear, greatly as he dreaded this perilous villain.

"All right," with a short laugh, as he turned toward camp. "It's getting pretty late fer start this evening. You can wait and pull with the sun in the morning, if you like."

"Thank ye—fer nothin', double durn!" last words being uttered below his breath by no means intended for Hawkings' ear.

He watched Wild Hawk until out of then dropped down on the tree-trunk, c palms, elbows supported by his doubt knees, his foxy eyes fixed on vacancy, his brain very busy.

"Ef I'd only see'd that paper afore I f ye back! Ef I only knowed all it hold wuth a pile o' money—don't I know! Don't I know you lied when you said you back to her onseen, onopened? Didn't I readin' it? Didn't I hear ye talk to you 'bout Kunnel Jo an' Maje Ed, an' the Good Lawd!" starting to his feet as though log had suddenly grown red-hot beneath him.

CHAPTER XI.

PLAYING TO GET EVEN.

It was the upper end of Jimmy Gee that the most strongly affected, however, and as eyes turned in the direction taken by the Hawk, they glowed as though turned into of living fire.

"Good Lawd!" he repeated, in a hissing g "I want to hunt a hole whar I kin think—t hard an' stiddy!"

So far as he could see, no one from the camp was watching his actions, but Jimmy was too thorough a fox to trust to mere appearances.

"Why didn't he drill me? 'Tain't lik p'izen critter to talk so much an' never sock his teeth in, deep? He says pull yit he don't foller the hint with a kick!"

like him—no it jest ain't, fer double sure, now!"

Even with that—to him—marvelous discovery whirring and buzzing through his brain, Jimmy Gee could not help speculating over the conduct of the chief of the Wild Hawks, giving him credit for acting fully as much under cover as above-board.

"Mebbe he's watchin' from them bushes!" the cunning but cowardly rascal mumbled, shivering in his boots as he tried to move from the spot without betraying too great a desire for concealment. "Mebbe he's jest playin' cat to my mouse! Good Lawd! ef I only dast to make a pitch head-fu'st fer kiver!"

As quickly as he could, without too openly betraying his fears, Jimmy Gee placed solid cover behind himself and the possible ambuscade. Not until then did he catch anything like a free breath, nor was he fully satisfied that his fears were baseless until he managed to steal a look into the little camp, distinguishing the figure of Wild Hawk in person, seated beneath a stunted tree, smoking his pipe while bending absordedly over what seemed to be a sheet of writing paper.

"The pesky hog!" snarled Jimmy Gee below his breath, as he noted this. "An' him sayin' that he'd give it back to the gal—an' butter wouldn't melt in the mouth o' him as he lied it off so!"

Though fully realizing his peril should Wild Hawk catch a glimpse of him playin' the spy, Jimmy Gee lingered long enough to see the outlaw chief refold the paper, placing it in the envelope and slipping the whole back into his breast pocket.

"Ef I could jest get my hooks onto it! Ef I could say fer sure jest how much they is tellin' o' the kid in yeu' paper!" hungrily mused Jimmy Gee, drawing back his head like a frightened turtle, worming his way close to the ground until fully hidden from view of Wild Hawk or any other human birds of prey.

He rose to his feet and slowly picked his way up the slope, finally seating himself on a point of rocks above the camp, where he knew not even the most cunning of the Hawks could approach him without making their purpose known.

"Grin, dug-gun ye!" he viciously hissed, as he caught Wild Hawk looking toward him. "I'm jest mournin' over gittin' kicked out o' sech bully good comp'ny, I be! I'm jest takin' a far'well squint at all ye noble heroes o' hist'ry, well's I kin fer the bitter tears o' grief an' sorrer an' lammytation that's scorchin' the eyes o' my head! Waal, you want to reckon I jest be, durn ye!"

Be sure Jimmy Gee did not shout these sentences at the top of his voice, dearly as he would have liked for Wilder Hawkings to know just how utterly he despised and execrated him—when his own precious person was far beyond reach of a practical answer.

He hardly dared trust them to his own ears, that though they never fairly crossed his lips, they must have given him satisfaction.

The Wild Hawk passed out of sight, and Jimmy broke, assuming an attitude of utter dejection, let venge is busy brain flit back to the wondrous fact and hat caused him such a start, but a few minutes reach earlier.

"Kunnel Jo, an' Maje Ed, an' the stolen kid! Yhem was what I ketched him talkin' to his of ad'v'n self 'bout. An' Kunnel Jo is livin' in Texas. of cou' Maje Ed is dead an' planted. An' the der th'len kid—is right down yender in that pile o' awa'fresh—fer mighty rocks!"

A glance of his yellow eyes pointed the last man sentence, and they caught a hungry look as he gazed upon the rude shelter provided for Elma Dickerman.

"Good Lawd! Ef I hed only stuck to that bun'le o' papers!" licking his lips as he writhed uneasily on his seat. "Ef I'd only bin taught how to read, even! Ef I hed—an' I could git the gal off to Texas—why not? She'd run away too mighty quick, ef I was to offer even the ghost of a chance!"

Jimmy Gee turned that brilliant idea over and over in his mind, trying to fit the facts to his theory.

If Elma was indeed what he believed, Colonel Jo would welcome him like a long-lost brother, even had he run off every head and hoof belonging to the Townsend Ranch, so long as he came back with the "kid" safe tucked under his wing.

"A fightin' cock wouldn't begin fer to tetch it! Good Lawd! I could swim neck deep in strugg'ld eagles ef I wanted! I could—ef I jest but th'ly could!"

There was the rub!

First, he must steal Elma out of that nest of evil birds. Second, he must gain possession of the papers which Wild Hawk carried on his person. Third, he must escape the chase which would surely follow, and then—

"Wouldn't Kunnel Jo swing me up to a tree 'thout givin' me time fer to belch out what I knowed an' what I'd done?"

Jimmy Gee groaned below his breath, and only for fear of exciting unpleasant suspicions in the breasts of the Wild Hawks below, he would have danced in his maddened perplexity, as the surest vent for his too strong emotions.

"It's got to come out ontangled ef I bu'st a flue!" he doggedly resolved, planting elbows on his knees, clasping his vulpine face with his joined hands, staring fixedly down upon the Wild Hawks' nest.

For more than an hour he remained thus, varying emotions changing his face, as one bold scheme after another was weighed and cast aside as impracticable, and the sun was just sinking to the horizon, when he finally gave over the fight, hardly half won.

"All the same, I'm goin' to play even, ef it takes the hide clean off up to the roof, Wild Hawk!" he muttered behind his teeth, as he slouched down the hill, and passed over to where his horse was staked out to graze.

Pulling up the picket-pin, Jimmy Gee shifted the animal to where he would find better nipping, then picked up his saddle, bridle and other equipage, pausing at the sharp call from Wilder Hawkings.

"Not going to rob us of your company so late, Jimmy Gee?"

"In the mornin' boss, 'less you kick me out afore."

"Good enough. We'll have a full night in which to rest before turning on the tear-stop!" laughed the other, mockingly.

"Ef they don't come red tears, you're mighty sight luckier then your deservin's!" mentally snapped the foxy rascal, meekly going his way, followed by cat-calls and jeers from the Wild Hawks.

Fawning like a whipped cur, Jimmy Gee crept back to the fire, meekly helping himself to a liberal cut of venison, and cooking it, while grinning as though he hugely enjoyed the rough jesting which the outlaws, taking their cue from their chief, liberally showered upon him.

"It's fun—mighty heap big fun, ain't it, gents?" he whined. "I ain't kickin'. I kin stan' all that and a hefty pile more, ef I hev to!"

As soon as his meal was finished, Jimmy Gee, carrying the uneaten portion of his supper with him, picked up his blanket, and shuffled off to himself.

There was nothing unusual in this, for such had been his habit ever since his joining the Hawks.

From the very first, those rough gentry had made no bones about betraying their strong dislike, and Jimmy Gee seemed to prefer comparative solitude to their coarse welcome.

Wilder Hawkings took the trouble to look after the exiled rascal at least once, before retiring to his own blanket, but Jimmy Gee was curled up like a hedgehog, snoring placidly, evidently lost in happy dreams, where peace were far more plentiful than kicks and cuffs.

"You'd bite if you dared, Jimmy," softly laughed Hawkings, as he beat a retreat, with a sleepy yawn. "If you wasn't such an infernal coward I'd slit your throat or drill your brainpan before turning you adrift."

There is such a thing as holding even a cur too harmless, and before that night came to an end, Wild Hawk was bitterly convinced that he had fallen into just such an error.

Not until after the stars told the passage of midnight, did Jimmy Gee break off that peaceful snoring, to slightly crest his head and steal a wary glance around him, before crawling out of his blanket, and worming his way along the path which he had mapped out before lying down to counterfeit slumber.

All was silent in and about the nest of the Wild Hawks. Those birds of prey had gone to roost, unless it might be a single guard before the brush hut in which Elma Dickerman was confined. If such there were, as had been the custom ever since the arrival of the party at that spot, he made no sign, gave no token of noticing the movements of Jimmy Gee.

Once while creeping toward the spot where he had "marked down" his particular prey, Jimmy Gee paused, alarmed, crouching under a bush with pistol drawn. There came a stir among the picketed horses, such as occasionally comes from the scenting of a prowling wolf.

That lasted only an instant or so, then quiet reigned once more.

Silently as ever a shadow could cover the same space, Jimmy Gee crept nearer to where Wilder Hawkings was sleeping, only a few yards from the little brush hut, and as he made out that muscular figure, the foxy rascal paused, shivering with sudden fear.

What if he was simply feigning sleep? What if it was but a cunning trap to ensnare him?

At the bare idea, his teeth clicked faintly against the bared blade which he held between his lips, ready to his hand, and only the strong love of gold kept Jimmy Gee from turning to flee for dear life.

Nothing less could have urged him to make such a dangerous venture, but he felt that if he could only get those papers once more into his possession, his everlasting fortune was made.

Pausing barely long enough to nerve himself by that thought, the thief crept still nearer his prey, now lying flat along the ground, hidden by a bunch of dry grass, which would shield him from those keen eyes in case Wild Hawk should waken too soon.

Foot by foot, almost inch by inch, Jimmy Gee crawled on, passing the bunch of grass and lying almost within arm's length of Hawkings.

The chief had wrapped his blanket around him on lying down, but the night was sultry, and he was thoroughly insured to out-door life. In his sleep he had turned on his back, and now lay without cover.

Jimmy Gee, knife in one hand, ready for vicious use in case of an alarm, gingerly reached out with his left hand, feeling delicately for the coveted package which he felt convinced nestled just over that steadily pulsing heart.

He was right!

He distinguished the papers by his pickpocket touch, and slipped a hand into the bosom of the sleeping outlaw. Then, just as he was carefully withdrawing his hand and the papers, Wilder Hawkings gave a start and opened his eyes!

Swift as a stroke of lightning that bared blade rose and fell, cutting short the angry cry that broke from the outlaw's lips, and Jimmy Gee, too badly frightened to withdraw his weapon from its living sheath, but still clinging to the papers, darted away toward his horse.

Hawkings yelled out savagely, but before the roused Hawks could touch weapon or leap to their feet, the whole herd of horses broke away in a mad stampede, fairly sweeping over the camp.

CHAPTER XII.

A TURMOIL IN THE HAWKS' NEST.

At the usual hour a plentiful supply of food was carried in to Elma Dickerman, though Wilder Hawkings sent another in his place, as he probably thought the sight of his face, after the recent interview, would hardly increase the captive's appetite.

By his orders, too, Elma was released from bonds, not only to feed herself, but for the night. Escape was not to be thought of, and Hawkings felt that his ends were hardly to be served by too harsh treatment just then.

Elma was a trifle paler, perhaps, but she showed no other signs of the recent ordeal, or of the desperate resolution which she had formed since being returned to the hut.

She believed both father and brother to be dead. She knew that she was many weary miles from the nearest spot in which she could locate even an ordinary friend. Yet she was determined to risk everything rather than remain longer a captive in such brutal hands.

She knew that one of the ruffians was stationed in front of the rude shelter as a guard, but that did not deter her long. Discovery of an effort to escape could hardly increase her peril.

Even before night fell she had selected the point through which she hoped to leave the hut. Formed as it was of simple sticks and brush, it would not be difficult to force a passage. The main risk would be of alarming the sentry on duty by crackling twigs or rustling the dry leaves still clinging to the branches.

Although a single bold effort might break a passage through the frail wall, Elma took time and patience to accomplish her ends, spending hours in what might have been wrought in as many minutes, only for the Wild Hawk on guard before her prison.

Through all she held herself ready to drop on her couch and feign sleep, should Wilder Hawkings come to visit her, or should the guard have his suspicions awakened; but neither the one nor the other occurred, and shortly after midnight Elma silently slipped through the

opening her patient hands had wrought, drawing in her first free breath since the sun set.

And yet, what a piteous case was hers, even then!

Without a weapon to defend herself against wild beast or human brute! Without food or means of procuring any! Leagues away from the nearest point where she might expect refuge or assistance, afoot, unarmed, a stranger in a desolate region!

For an instant she quailed as all this flashed through her whirling brain, but only for an instant.

"Let what may come, there's worse behind," she murmured, bending low, and gliding silently from the hut.

Her sole fear now was lest Wild Hawk should suddenly uprise in her path, with his mocking, devilish laugh as he barred the way.

Little did she think that, just then, an ugly blade was being held over that evil heart, ready to strike, swift and sure as the stroke of the vicious copperhead.

Elma was beginning to draw a full, free breath, feeling that the greatest peril was over, now that she had crept fairly beyond range of the sentry's eyes, when, like magic, the sleeping camp was roused by that savage cry from the lips of Wild Hawk, cut in twain by the vicious stroke of Jimmy Gee's bowie.

And as though the yell was a signal, the horses broke away, with frightened neighings, plunging and trampling down all in their blind path, followed by others as they tore up picket-pins or snapped ropes.

Fortunately for her, Elma was at one side of that swath, and, stifling a cry of terror, she turned to flee still further from the swirling stampede—only to rush squarely into the arms of a dark figure that sprang up in her path!

A shrill, despairing shriek burst from her lungs, for she believed that the arms of Wilder Hawkings were clasping her; a shriek that was heard even above the wild tumult caused by the stampeding herd, the yelling, cursing, groaning of the demoralized outlaws.

"Elmy—sister!" cried the familiar voice of Chincapin Dan, almost at the same instant. "Fer love o' Heaven—too late!"

"Rally, men!" thundered the harsh voice of Wild Hawk in person. "Look out for the girl! Catch her, at all risks!"

"Dan—Danny!" gasped the poor girl, hardly knowing what to say or do in her joyous bewilderment, but, Chincapin Dan better realized the situation, and catching her from her feet, he leaped for the nearest cover, hurriedly saying:

"You take her, pard—I'll lead 'em off on a false scent!"

"I'll guard her with my life!" flashed Curly Temple, his arms replacing those of the brother, as Chincapin Dan almost flung the bewildered maiden from him.

Swift as a cat, Chincapin Dan leaped away at right angles, one hand partially covering his lips as he imitated the voice of his sister:

"Mercy! let me—"

He ended with a choking scream, so natural that even Curly Temple was deceived by it.

"Danny—come back!" moaned Elma, almost prostrated by the shock of that meeting with one whom, even yet, she could hardly believe was alive.

"He's safe—safer far than we are, Miss Elma," whispered Curly Temple as he bore her deeper into the bushes. "We're his friends. We saved his life, and we mean to rescue you from those demons if you'll only trust to us. I beg of you, don't cry out again."

The warning came just in time, for Elma gave a frightened start as another shadowy figure seemed to rise from out the ground before her, huskily muttering:

"Stiddy, lad! It's only me—cain't yo see?"

The wild turmoil in the Hawks' Nest hardly lessened, though by this time the stampeding horses were far away, still plunging along in blind, unreasoning flight.

Once more a half-stifled scream came from the distance, closely followed by a couple of shots from a pistol.

"This way!" screamed Wild Hawk, plunging in headlong haste in that direction. "One o' the boys is on the track. After them—a hundred to the man that pins the fool girl first!"

"Good Lawd!" chuckled Uncle Billy Breeze, brushing a hand across his heated brows as he listened to that mad charge by all, or nearly all of the outlaws. "Ain't he a clipper, jest? An' I tuck him fer a crazy loonatic! Durn fool me!"

"We must improve the chance and get out of here, lively!" muttered Curly Temple, too deep-

ly interested in the safety of this fair original of the picture which had made such a powerful impression upon his mind and heart the moment he saw it first, to give thought to the danger Chincapin Dan was so boldly inviting.

"Ef our critters was only in reach!" groaned Uncle Billy, dejectedly, as he turned to lead the way through the bushes.

"Then you didn't get any?" asked Curly, in a tone of disgust.

"Not a durn critter! Not a smell, even! An' ef you'll jest tell me how it all come 'round, be durned ef I don't fess up you're mighty heap smarter than I be—so I jest will, now!"

There was no time to spare in asking questions or giving answers, just then.

Though the outlaws were seemingly all away on the false scent so audaciously laid before them by the boy trailer, at any moment they might discover the truth, and swarm back, hot to wipe out their blunder.

By this time Elma began to realize that she had fallen into the hands of true friends, though even yet it was difficult to believe her brother had escaped with life—for hadn't she seen him lying in his gore, so ghastly, so still, so death-like?

"Trust to us, Miss Elma," softly whispered Curly, his arm about her lithe waist, one hand clasping hers, the better to assist her over that rough trail in the darkness. "You are perfectly safe as long as either of us can strike a blow."

"Or lift a huff in runnin' away," amended Uncle Billy Breeze, coming to a halt and bending his head in listening to the sounds below. "Fer light-foot beats heavy-hand all holler jest now. Lis'en! ef ye take tha'r measure by sound, they's nigh a millyun o' the pesky imps!"

"Not more than twenty, sir," ventured Elma.

"Thank-ee, ma'am," chuckled Uncle Billy, with a nod and cheery smile, both lost in the gloom of the dense storm-clouds, however. "That shows you ain't so mighty terrible bad skeered, which is monstrous good news fer two men in our pickle—yes, it is, now, honey!"

"Press on, Uncle Billy," impatiently muttered Curly, actually foolish enough to feel jealous of the old fellow, whose tongue was so glib and free with his endearing terms!

"Press goes, an' I'm wishin' it wasn't quite sech a long an' crooked press, too! Ef the two kids was only right here, we might mebbe pick up a hole to hide in, closter than that crater, as ye calls it."

"They'll die of old age unless yon make haste, Billy Breeze!" impatiently uttered the young man; not that he was so anxious to shorten the journey which permitted him to almost embrace the fair girl, but he felt a natural uneasiness concerning Frank and Will, whom they had left stationed at a certain point, with strict orders not to move from it until their return.

"I'll mark 'em on the back with red chalk ef they do stick, 'ith all this bobbery goin' on everywhars!" muttered Uncle Billy, using more haste as they left the Hawks' Nest further behind them. "But it's dollars to cents they got fooled the same way as the pesky imps, an' ef we ever clap our two lookin' eyes onto 'em ag'in, I'm goin' to die out o' pure joy an' ginewine surprise—I jest be, now!"

No attention was paid to his dolorous whine, however, and five minutes later the two brothers were found, faithful to their trust, greatly to Uncle Billy's surprise and delight, even if he failed to die of the shock!

"Where's Chincapin?" whispered Frank, stealing a curious glance at that pale face.

"Nothing has happened to him, I hope?"

"Of course not," hastily replied Curly with a warning kick that made the young fellow wince and draw back his tingling shin. "He's just gone on ahead, to the crater, where we want to follow him as quickly as possible."

"Listen to the coyotes yelpin'!" exclaimed Will, as distant yells and shouts came from the night.

"Not in our path, please Heaven!" muttered Curly, once more aiding Elma over the rough ground.

The brothers were curious to learn just how the alarm had risen, and though Uncle Billy Breeze was reluctant to enter upon the matter, just then, he knew better than to flatly refuse.

It seemed, from his account, that the stampede was purely accidental, coming through no fault of his own. Either that angry yell from the sleeping camp startled them, restless under the threatening storm, as all animals are when under the open sky, or else a prowling wolf might have nipped a heel as it skulked past in the grass.

Be that as it might, the fact remained that Uncle Billy's attempt to secure a mount for each of the party, including Elma, should they be so fortunate as to effect her rescue, had resulted in complete failure.

He had not succeeded in leading away a single horse, though at the moment the alarm broke forth, he had two in hand. They broke away from him, and another knocked him endlong as it stampeded.

"But we got the gal, anyway," Uncle Billy said, trying feebly to console all hands for the fiasco.

Half an hour later the little party reached the agreed-upon rendezvous; a peculiar depression in the top of a considerable hill which resembled a miniature crater: and Curly Temple ventured to call out:

"Chincapin Dan! are you here?"

But there came no reply; the Boy Trailer was not there!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SIEGE OF THE CRATER.

CURLY TEMPLE almost instantly regretted having uttered the call, for he felt Elma shiver spasmodically, and knew that she was fearing the worst for her brother.

"I hardly thought he had time to get here ahead of us," he lightly added. "Still, Dan is so nimble that— Well, it isn't best to run any more risks than one has to, and Danny might have mistaken us for part of the enemy."

"He is safe? He will come back?" murmured Elma, looking beseechingly into his face.

"He will, never fear, Miss Elma," was the earnest reply. "He knew just where we were to rally; indeed, it was his idea, in the main. And then, if anything *should* happen, I pledge you my honor to save Daniel or to share his fate!"

Curly was dreadfully in earnest, and somehow Elma seemed to place implicit reliance in all this handsome young fellow said or did. It was rather remarkable, considering that, as yet, they had hardly had time or light enough to tell whether the other was white or black, comely or hideous; but such things will happen occasionally.

Meanwhile Uncle Billy Breeze had made his way over the crest and into the miniature crater, assuring himself that no enemy had found hiding there before them.

This was a rather peculiar spot, discovered by Chincapin Dan, after having successfully trailed the Wild Hawks to their Nest.

A bowl-like depression, on the very top of a hill, overlooking the country for some little distance in all directions, the "crater" afforded not only a good point for defense, but an admirable hiding-place, in case its existence should prove unknown to the enemy.

When first discovered by the Boy Trailer, who was trying to map out the exact lay of the Hawks' Nest, the "bowl" was half filled with loose stones, from the size of a doubled fist to a mighty boulder. And while lying there under cover, waiting for the coming of night to hide their daring venture, the little band did what they could to perfect that natural fort, only taking good care not to betray their presence by pushing the rock wall too prominently into view.

"Pears like I could sleep loud 'nough fer a hull rijimint, an' long 'nough fer to stretch clean from this to next summer!" yawned Uncle Billy Breeze, when the fugitives were fairly established in the crater. "But that ain't the proper racket jest now, no it ain't, honeys! Got to finish that wall, ef it breaks every pesky back into the comp'ny—yes, we jest hev, now!"

Despite his doleful whine, the veteran set a good example, and only guarding against making noise enough to catch the ear of a prowling Hawk, should any such chance along that way, the defenses were completed as perfectly as possible.

"You fear it will be needed, then?" timidly asked Elma, as Curly, warm and tired as dusty, came to where she was watching their movements. "Those terrible men will discover us!"

"It's best to err on the side of safety, don't you think, Miss Elma?" softly laughed the young fellow, taking her hand in his and giving it a reassuring pressure. "We'll hope they'll not come, but if such is to be, there's nothing like being ready to give such visitors a hearty welcome."

Yet it was anything but a cheering prospect. Discovery by the Wild Hawks was almost inevitable, should they see fit to make a search, for they had crossed ground where, in the darkness, they could not help leaving behind them a trail plain enough for all to read aright.

If that unlucky stampede had not taken place, just as it did! If they had even one horse, on which to mount the girl! Or if Chincapin Dan had not been forced by circumstances to separate himself from them in order to give Elma a chance for flight.

With several hours of darkness before them, they might have gained a vast advantage, particularly if that menacing storm should break into rain.

"They's jest one way," grimly nodded Uncle Billy Breeze, as the boys gathered around him after completing the stone wall. "Ef them pesky imps do smell us out, we've got to stan' em off ontel dark comes ag'in, then somebody's got to sneak out an' make a streak fer help."

As dawn broke without anything being seen or heard of Chincapin Dan, Elma grew more and more nervous, fearing the worst, nor could the cheering words of Curly Temple reassure her altogether, though his efforts were not entirely thrown away.

"Who said spoons?" muttered Will, with a malicious twinkle in his sleepy eyes as Curly chanced to pass him by.

Uncle Billy Breeze was snoring away at a tremendous rate. Frank was also trying to make up for lost time in the same direction, and Will also slumbered some, though not so soundly as to make him oblivious to all that might go on around him, as that sleepy whisper proved.

The sun rose clear, the storm which had been threatening to burst almost the night through, passed away, leaving the heavens unflecked by a cloud.

Nothing was seen or heard of Chincapin Dan, though both Elma and Curly kept up an almost unbroken watch from the moment there was light enough to see beyond that hill.

Elma was in despair, and Temple could only show a fictitious ease, for unless something disastrous had happened to the Boy Trailer, he surely would have gained the rendezvous long ere that hour.

"Eh? grub time?" grunted Uncle Billy Breeze, starting to a sitting posture under the rough shaking administered by Curly Temple.

"They're coming," was the curt explanation.

"Be durned ef they ain't, now!" ejaculated the veteran, as he hurriedly sought a loop-hole in the stone wall. "Comin' jest as though they see a sign hung out axin' fer boarders!"

"The sign lies down yonder," gloomily nodded Curly, alluding to the soft, almost marshy tract of ground through which they had been forced to pass the night before. "They've read it close enough to know we're all on foot. That tells them we couldn't have gone very far. And so they're pretty confident we have sought cover—I told you so!"

Though Elma had sunk into slumber, Curly was too deeply excited to feel fatigue, and perhaps it was just as well, else the Wild Hawks might have effected a disastrous surprise. As it was, Temple saw them approaching the crater, on foot, but heavily armed, each movement plainly betraying their strong suspicions as to what that cover concealed. And as that ejaculation burst from his lips, one of the company flitted a white rag in the air over his head, advancing briskly up the slope, covered by the rifles of his men behind.

"I wouldn't do to drap him off-hand, reckon, lad?" muttered Uncle Billy Breeze. "Ither way he's boun' fer to know we're in here!"

"Steady, you!" sharply cried Curly, showing his head and shoulders above the barricade, motioning the flag-bearer to halt. "Reckon you'd better wait for an invitation before you trample up a gentleman's front door-yard!"

"Delighted to see you, dear sir," bowed Wilder Hawkings, showing his teeth in a vicious smile, but promptly obeying that challenge. "You have a lady friend of mine up there, I believe?"

"A friend of yours? And yet a lady?" scornfully cried Temple.

"Remarkable, isn't it?" smiled the outlaw, pressing a hand to his side, where a blood-stained bandage was visible, even at that distance. "Almost as strange as that one of you high-toned noblemen should crawl into a friendly camp and stab a sleeping man, while robbing him!"

"You lie when you say it!" flashed Curly, his handsome face flushing hotly under that taunt.

"An' I'm backin' him up in that, dug-gun ye!" declared Uncle Billy Breeze, showing his figurehead over the barricade. "As fer the leddy, she wouldn't wipe a ole shoe on the likes o' sech as you! She says go hunt your hole, an' take them two-legged rats 'long with ye,' 'fore some o' ye ketch yer everlastin'!"

"Excuse me if I take a seat without being in-

vited, gentlemen," bowed Wild Hawk, dropping down on the nearest bowlder, his face showing the effects of the ugly wound inflicted by the startled hand of Jimmy Gee. "You seem to be in an ugly humor this morning, and if we have to argue the case at length, my wounds must plead my excuse."

"They's heap sight softer dornicks down yen' way," grimly nodded Uncle Billy Breeze. "Or, ef ye must stay, please turn the wind t'other way, an' mobbe we kin stan' it longer to listen."

"Facetious, aren't you?" sneered Wild Hawk, flushing hotly, but keeping his tones well under control. "Insults don't count just yet, and I'm talking to your betters. I say, sir?"

"Meaning me?" asked Curly Temple.

"If you claim to be chief, yes. You've got a young lady with you, who belongs by rights to me."

"By what rights?"

"The right of discovery, for one," bowed Hawkings. "That of sole living relative for another."

"You—my relative?" scornfully cried Elma Dickerman, springing to the barricade and flashing a look of indignant loathing into that darkly handsome face. "If I thought a single drop of such evil blood flowed in my veins, I'd drain it out, though in so doing I had to empty every vein in my body!"

"Thanks," bowed Wild Hawk, laughing viciously at having thus gained the information he most desired. "Now that I know for sure you are there, I'll talk business."

"We know just how many you number, gentlemen, and know we can eat you up at a single bite, if it comes to that. But we don't want to shed blood if we can get along without it."

"Give me that girl, and the rest of you may go foot-free. Refuse to do this—"

"As we most assuredly do, you scoundrel!" flashed Temple.

"Can't I alter your decision by argument, my dear fellow?"

"You can dig your own grave with your tongue! Climb out of that, you cur, or not even a white flag can shield your murderous carcass!"

"All right," carelessly nodded Wild Hawk, rising to his feet, the white flag resting on a shoulder as he turned away. "When you get hungry or thirsty, just run up a signal, and maybe I'll have time to talk a little further."

Without a backward glance, or hastening his steps, the steel-nerved villain passed down the slope and over to where his men were awaiting the result of his embassy. And a few moments after he joined them, those in the crater saw several of the Hawks skulking around as if to make sure none of their intended victims stole away in quest of aid.

"The cowardly curs!" frowned Curly Temple as he noted this action. "That means a cold-blooded siege of it!"

"Reckon it does," groaned Uncle Billy Breeze, the picture of doleful dumps. "Wouldn't matter a durn ef we only hed a 'vision store an' a river o' water, an' a—"

"Shut!" frowned Temple, with a warning flash of his blue eyes, as he turned away to join Elma Dickerman.

"Was I wrong, to defy the villains so openly, Mr. Temple?" timidly murmured the poor girl. "He only wanted me! if I would go to him, he might let you all go free and—"

A gentle hand touched her lips, checking her utterance. Curly said nothing, but his blue eyes were eloquent enough to bring a warm blush to her pale cheeks. She knew then that while a breath of life remained, Curly Temple would never surrender her to that pitiless villain.

Side by side they crossed the crater, peering over the wall, to discover a skulking figure only a few rods below them, and Curly leveled his rifle, only to have it knocked up by Elma, with a scream of joy:

"Danny—my darling brother!"

Chincapin Dan darted forward, cheering derisively as several shots pattered about him, leaping over the wall, just as the Hawks charged up the hill with savage yells, firing as they came.

CHAPTER XIV.

RUNNING INTO A NOOSE.

Too badly frightened to even think of withdrawing his knife from where it quivered in the side of Wilder Hawkings, Jimmy Gee leaped up and fled for dear life, narrowly escaping being knocked down and trampled under foot by the stampeding horses.

Yet he clung to the papers to secure which he

had run such risk, and jerking up the picket-pin, he leaped on the back of his horse without thought for saddle or bridle, dashing away at break-neck speed through the night.

That wild uproar served to cover his flight, and before it subsided, before the bewildered Hawks could fairly realize what had taken place, Jimmy Gee was far beyond earshot of the keenest among them.

But it was not until he had placed several miles behind him that the rascal dared check the pace of his good steed in the slightest, or to draw anything like a free breath.

When he finally did so, his first thought was to look back and hearken to see if any close pursuit was being made. He could hear nothing, and in that gloom eyesight availed but little.

His next was for his precious papers. They were safe enough, provided he had gotten hold of the right ones.

"Good Lawd!" he exploded, as that doubt assailed him. "Ef I hev! Ef that cussed imp hes fooled me, after all!"

It was too dark for him to reassure himself fully, though the envelope looked dark and similar to that which he had noticed when he first found the important package.

"I'd crack a match, ef I only knowed them pesky imps wasn't cluss ahind me," he muttered, digging both heels into the flanks of his horse and sending him forward at a rapid rate. "I don't dast to resk it jest now, though! Yit—I hit hard an' bit mighty deep, but sech p'izen imps hes got a life it takes a ten-foot pole to tetch—wuss luck!"

For mile upon mile he kept up that blind flight, urged on by his curish terror of the man whom he had struck in his sleep, and it was not until his horse showed plain signs of exhaustion, and the light of a new day was dawning in the east, that he dared stop long enough to set his haunting fears of an error at rest.

He alighted near a little stream, staking his horse out to graze a bit before permitting it to reach the water. And then he took the stolen papers from his bosom, into which he had thrust them for safety, eagerly scrutinizing them, to break into a harsh cackle of delight as he recognized the same envelope of oil-skin which he had twice before noticed.

"Good Lawd! ef I only jest knowed how to read!" wistfully eying those enigmatical black characters on the paper which he extracted from its envelope. "Ef I could jest begin fer to make out what them buggy things spell out loud!"

But that being out of the question, Jimmy Gee had to make the best of it, and trust to what he knew about "Kunnel Jo. Maje Ed, an' the kid," of whom he had heard Wilder Hawkings muttering that night.

Squatting down where he could gain a long view in the direction from whence he had come, Jimmy Gee pulled from a pocket the cold meat saved from his last meal for that express purpose, and gnawing at it, he reviewed his situation and tried to mark out his future.

"Ef I knowed jest whar to find Uncle Billy an' them boys, reckon I'd run less resk in j'inin' them then in moseyin' fer Kunnel Jo an' Texas-way. But I don't know, an' they ain't no time to spend in huntin' 'em up—wuss luck! Them pesky Hawks 'll hit off my trail, an' I won't be safe a minnit ontel I'm over the line an' in a white kentry—no I jest won't, now!"

So powerful were the fears thus conjured up, that Jimmy Gee hardly gave his horse time to eat a bite and quench its thirst, before he was once more astride its back, riding recklessly toward the Texas border.

All of his fears were directed to the rear, and he rode for many rods without once looking ahead, fearing at every ridge he crossed to sight the Wild Hawks speeding along in vengeful pursuit of the man who had slain their chief.

And thus it happened that Jimmy Gee ran blindly into the noose; literally so, for as he was passing a point of timber, looking backward for a final inspection of the rear before having his view shut off by the timber, a couple of lassoes shot out from the cover, one settling over his head and shoulders, to jerk him unceremoniously to the ground, the other to check the pace of his jaded horse.

Stunned by the shock, Jimmy Gee was safe bound before he could fairly realize the misfortune which had overtaken him, much less draw weapon or lift a hand to defend himself.

And when he did open his eyes, it was to shrink back shivering, a frightened gasp parting his lips.

"Kunnel Jo!"

"Jimmy Gee!"

With a howl of uncontrollable terror, the wretch burrowed his face into the ground, shivering like a leaf as he recognized that stern voice and sterner face.

"Pick up the cur and bring him back under cover, boys," coldly said the leader of the party, turning away from that disgusting sight.

Though his hair and long beard were beginning to show silvery threads, Colonel Joseph Townsend bore a remarkably strong likeness to his two sons whom we have met, particularly the eldest.

Jimmy Gee was dragged into the timber, and stood up before Colonel Jo, in whose hands his fate rested.

"Where are my boys, Jimmy Gee?" coldly asked the colonel.

"Deed an' double 'deed I hain't set eys onto 'em, Kunnel Jo!" declared the utterly demoralized rascal, who would have fallen in a limp and nerveless heap but for the supporting hands of the grim cowboys.

"You are lying, Jimmy Gee, by the eyes of you, but I looked for nothing better from such a miserable wretch. Fortunately there is one way to loosen the tongue of such as you. Make ready a noose, some of you!"

"You won't—you don't dast to hang me!" gasped Jimmy Gee, utter desperation lending his tongue a nimbleness which he had lacked during those first few minutes of awful surprise.

"Don't build any hopes on that, Jimmy Gee," nodded Colonel Jo, with a grim smile twitching his mustaches. "I dare hang a horse-thief when and wherever I run across him, and you were born with another man's halter in your fist."

Just then a cowboy came forward, a flat package in his hand, the other respectfully touching his hat, as he addressed his master:

"I found it out yender, boss, whar the critter tuck his tumble. I reckon mebbe he lost it out o'—"

"It's mine!" cackled Jimmy Gee, making a desperate effort to break away from his guards, and seize upon that precious document before it could reach the hands of his captor. "Don't ye dast to— Hold on!"

"Is it so mighty valuable, Jimmy Gee?" laughed Colonel Jo, taking the package, but not even glancing at the direction on its back. "Then you'd better make a will, and tell me to whom you bequeath this mighty treasure."

"I'll tell ye—I'll tell ye the hull thing, ef you'll only jest let me go free o' hangin', boss!" whined the miserable wretch, as one of the cowboys dropped a slip-noose over his head. "I was runnin' to find ye the quickest way, for they's in that you'd give an arm fer to know, an' I kin jest— Hold on!" fairly frothing at the mouth, as Townsend, startled by those strange words, seemed about to open the paper.

One of the cowboys unceremoniously crammed a wad of dry grass into his mouth, effectually checking his frantic outcry.

Colonel Jo glanced at the superscription, but that told him nothing; simply a name which he had never seen or heard before.

Then he took the folded papers from the envelope, rapidly glancing over the first few lines of crabbed writing, to turn ghastly pale, and start back with a low cry of mingled amazement and wonder.

Swiftly rallying, he sprung to where Jimmy Gee stood, tearing the grass gag from his mouth as he hoarsely demanded:

"Is this true? Where is the girl? What do you know about it? Talk fair, you devil, or I'll tear your crooked tongue out by the roots!"

The cowboys stood by in open-mouthed amazement, for the cool and steady nerve of "Colonel Jo" had passed into a proverb. Never before had living man beheld him so terribly shaken, so utterly without control of his fierce passions.

But as he heated, Jimmy Gee cooled, meeting that fiery gaze with a boldness born of utter desperation.

"Not a darn word 'll I speak, Kunnel Jo, 'thout you come to my tarms, fu'st off!" he doggedly declared.

"Speak, or I'll kill you by inches."

"Cross the heart o' ye, an' swear by heaven an' hell that you'll let me skip the rope, an' that you'll pay me fer all the trouble I've tuck, an' resk I've run, an'—"

Jimmy Gee over-reached himself right there, and in trying to win everything, he bade fair to lose all, even his precious life.

Colonel Jo regained his usual coolness, stepping back and lifting a hand as he curtly said:

"Do your duty, lads!"

A cowboy tossed the free end of the lasso over a stout limb, and catching it as it fell on the other side, drew it taut with steady and practiced hand, nodding to his mates with:

"Lend a hand, mates. 'Tain't like runnin' a rope through a slick block, an' though he ain't much more'n skin an' bones, he's too hefty fer me, good as my will is!"

The noose tightened about Jimmy Gee's neck, but before it swung him clear of his feet, he screamed forth:

"I'll tell—don't hang me, fer love o'—"

"Silence! you blaspheming cur!" sternly interposed Colonel Jo. "If you call on any name, let it be that of your patron, the devil."

"I know whar she is—the gal baby that was stole, boss," whined the wretch, hardly able to stand, yet clinging to his hopes of gaining a rich reward for his treachery. "She's in mighty danger, ef she ain't tuck out o' them evil clutches in a monst'ous hurry!"

"Go on, you knave," coldly warned the colonel.

"I was ridin' hot-fut to tell ye whar she was kept, boss, when I missed stealin' her 'way to bring along so's she could tell her own story. I jest got cl'ar—you kin see I didn't dast stop long 'nough fer to onsaddle or bridle, an'—"

"Pinch him a bit, lads," nodded Townsend. "He's trying to talk us all to death without saying anything."

A heave on the lasso carried Jimmy Gee off his feet, and though he was lowered after swinging forward and back once each way, he sunk in a nerveless heap on the ground.

Colonel Jo stepped forward and loosened the noose about his neck, but leaving the rope still in place, showing no ray of hope in either face or voice as he spoke to the horse-thief:

"That's the first bite, Jimmy Gee. Next time you'll take a full meal, unless you conclude to talk free, and talk straight at the same time. You understand, I reckon?"

The miserable wretch moaned faintly, overcome by fear rather than the slight choking he had suffered. He seemed to try to speak, but though Colonel Jo bent an ear close to his lips, he failed to catch an articulate word, even.

With his own hands he cast off the noose, lifting Jimmy Gee to his feet, holding him erect with one hand, while quivering a forefinger before his face with the other, speaking deliberately:

"Sure as there is a heaven above us this day, Jimmy Gee, I'll hang you high as a kite unless you tell the whole truth. You know where the girl is, you say; swear to guide me there, or die like a dog!"

"I will—I'll show ye, boss," whined the cowed rascal.

"If you fail now, I'll have you flayed alive, Jimmy Gee!"

CHAPTER XV.

A SHOT FOR VENGEANCE.

"FER PAP—score it down to his name!" yelled Chincapin Dan, sending a bullet crashing through the brain of a Wild Hawk as he safely gained the crater.

Uncle Billy Breeze winged another, and the boys burnt powder with a hearty good will, though they contributed little more than noise to the fight, in their natural excitement, that being their "baptism of fire."

The rush was checked, for it was little more than a bluff at best, and while the Boy Trailer was peering in vain for the dark face of the man who had killed his father, Wilder Hawkings sounded the signal for his men to fall back.

The outlaws kept carefully beyond easy range, and even then exposing their precious carcasses as little and as briefly as possible while collecting about their chief, doubtless to hear his plans.

During this respite, Chincapin Dan briefly explained his protracted absence. He had been chased hard and closely by the Wild Hawks, who doubtless believed he was accompanied by the rescued captive, and only caring to keep out of their death-grip, he played with the outlaws until the growing dawn warned him to break the scent, lest they at once discover how he had cheated them.

After that, owing to the distance, the lay of the ground, and the fact that Wilder Hawkings had already struck off the correct trail, he found it a difficult and dangerous matter to reach the crater, where he knew his friends must be worrying over his prolonged absence.

This respite, too, was improved by the younger hunters, and ere long their nerves were steady, their brains cool and clear enough to in-

sure better, if no bolder shooting than they had done in their first attempt at bringing down human game.

Chincapin Dan chafed hotly, longing for a fair chance at his particular enemy, whom he now had no difficulty in deciding was Wilder Hawkings. What Elma told him, added to the vivid memory of that dark, bearded face glaring at him over a leveled rifle, put all doubts at rest.

"Fer pap—all I ax is one chaine!"

But hour after hour passed without that chance being afforded, though it was clear enough that the Wild Hawks were hatching up some desperate scheme by which they hoped to win their ends.

At length it came, in threatening shape.

Six of the keenest marksmen among the gang found cover within easy range of the crater, and opened a hot fire with their Winchester repeaters, evidently hoping to keep the besieged below the rock wall, while the main force could scale the hill and come to close quarters.

"Let 'em think so," muttered Chincapin Dan, kneeling at a small hole through the stone wall, rifle in hand. "Let 'em git fairly up the hill, then sock it to 'em!"

The bullets hummed over the barricade, or, chipping the upper edge, curved upward and onward with a shrill, vicious whir-r-r!

The main force of the Wild Hawks broke cover and came dashing at full speed up the slope, yet making such use of the convenient cover as their pace and positions would permit.

Chincapin Dan strained his eyes in hopes of recognizing Wilder Hawkings, but without success. If the chief was among the charging party, he was invisible from the loop-hole selected by the Boy Trailer.

"Don't bust a cap at him—mind ye, pards!" sternly cried Chincapin Dan, as he caught a bead on one of the leading ruffians. *He's my meat—he killed pap, ye know!*

It was a daring, desperate charge, despite the aid rendered by the hidden marksmen below, but even as the hopes of the Wild Hawks grew higher, they learned the bitter truth; instead of being cowering in fear, their intended victims were simply waiting to insure a victory at a single blow.

Chincapin Dan gave the signal; a death-shot, so truly delivered that his target never realized that his end had come.

And coolly, deliberately, yet in rapid succession, the other rifles behind that barricade spat forth death and ugly wounds, the repeaters keeping a fringe of fire-tinged smoke encircling the crater.

"Good Lawd!" rung out the shrill voice of Uncle Billy Breeze, as he nobly "held up his end" with the rest. "I hain't bed so much fun sence— Looky yander! Ef 'tain't Kunnel Jo, then I don't know!"

With a screech that almost split his throat, tough and seasoned though that was, Uncle Billy leaped upon the barricade and hurled his battered tile high into the air, for across the level came dashing a force of mounted men, with a tall, gallant figure in the lead.

"Whooray fer hoo—ge-lory to amen!"

A loose stone turned under his dancing feet, and Uncle Billy toppled backward, crushing Will Townsend beneath his weight, and probably saving his own life by the accident, for a bullet scraped his bald pate as he tumbled—the last shot fired by the now thoroughly demoralized Hawks, at the barricade, at least.

"Thar he goes!" savagely cried Dan, leaping up just in time to catch sight of Wilder Hawkings in full flight toward the horses which had been brought up during the forenoon. "Run—but you're my meat! Pap says so!"

Bouncing over the barricade like a buck, the Boy Trailer plunged down the hill, seeing nothing, caring for nothing but that one fleeing shape. And as he saw Wilder Hawkings scramble into the saddle of the first horse he came to, wheeling away at a sharp angle, to escape meeting or passing too near the party of rescuers, Chincapin Dan leveled his repeater and covered his game.

Wild Hawk started at the shot, flinching as though hit, but the hastily-aimed missile had simply given him a severe shock, striking the heavy buckle of his arms' belt, breaking it and letting the belt fall away.

He made a frantic grasp at it, and caught the butt of a revolver, the belt itself escaping and falling to the ground behind him as the weapon slipped from its scabbard.

Another pull of the trigger—a dull snap! The rifle was empty, and fearing to lose time just then in reloading, Chincapin rushed at top speed toward the nearest horse, tearing up its picket-

pin and leaping into the saddle, then speeding away in deadly pursuit of his sworn victim.

He heard wild, excited yells and scattered shots, but he never turned his head, never stopped to note whether they were from friends or from enemies. His man was before him, riding a good horse for dear life, and all the world else was as naught to him, just then.

"I'll fetch him, pap!" came gratingly through his set teeth, his long hair flying, his eyes glowing, his face white and vengeful beyond the power of words to describe. "He killed you, an' I'll kill him! He's my meat—ef I hev to foller him clear through hell!"

For a mile Wilder Hawkings rode with only an eye to speed and care for the horse which he had taken; not his own, as he began to lament ere even that short distance was covered.

Then he turned to glance backward, showing his teeth viciously as he recognized that single pursuer. If it was only he! But beyond were many more enemies, and he felt that he would be hotly chased, even were the Hawks of meaner breed permitted to flee unharmed.

By that time, too, Chincapin Dan grew cool-headed enough to see that, barring accidents, he would in the end overtake his game. His horse was fully as fleet, and he rode much lighter than did Hawkings.

"I've got him, pap! Didn't I tell ye I would?"

He rested his rifle before him, and began filling the empty magazine with cartridges, his fingers never steadier than in that supreme hour.

Wild Hawk noted how he was employed, and turning in his saddle, he tried to catch a sure aim with his sole remaining weapon. But his wounds rendered him less supple than usual, and Chincapin Dan flung forward his rifle, the two weapons exploding at almost the same instant.

"Ye're my meat, I tell ye, devil!" screamed the avenger, with a wild peal of laughter as he saw the revolver fly from the bleeding fingers of the fugitive, struck by his snap-shot, while he himself had been untouched. "I'm Chincapin Dan, critter! I'm the kid o' the man you butchered back by the Rocky! An' you're my meat, ef I be a weenty boy!"

Cursing, raving, frantic with pain and maddened by the loss of his last weapon, Wilder Hawkings bent over his horse's withers and urged it on with heel and hand.

Was he to die thus? Was he to perish at the hands of a mere lad?

Crippled as he was, one hand maimed, his side stinging him fiercely as the bandage slipped down with his violent exertions, the blood beginning to flow afresh, he felt tempted to wheel and charge upon his pursuer, feeling that he must win if he could only come to close quarters before being shot again.

Not for long did that temptation last however. Only long enough for him to gain one square look into that fiercely-set face. And as he again bent forward to madly urge his horse on, heading for the river where he might find shelter or succor, a strange, chilling fear took possession of the evil man's heart.

After that one shot, Chincapin Dan held his fire, knowing that at almost any moment he could kill or cripple the horse or man, or both. It was a delicious foretaste of vengeance, and he would not cut it short too quickly!

A fringe of timber ahead began to loom up distinctly, and though that portion of the country was new to Dan, he knew that a river or stream of water lay before them.

He urged his horse on, slowly gaining on the fugitive, now only a few rods ahead. With such a short start, escape by hiding in the timber was out of the question, but, as he saw Wild Hawk near the cover, Chincapin drew up his rifle, meaning to cripple the horse.

His own horse stumbled, breaking through a hole, falling headlong, hurling its rider far over its head.

The shock was great, but Dan escaped without broken bones, and, snatching up his rifle, he dashed on in pursuit of Hawkings, just then plunging into the cover.

If Wild Hawk knew of that accident, he never slackened his pace on that account, leaping down the steep bank and out upon the narrow strip of sand-bar bordering the river, here flowing swiftly as it prepared for a plunge down a rapids almost steep enough to be called a waterfall.

He urged his horse into the river, slipping from the saddle the moment his animal lost its footing in deep water, both to facilitate its swimming, and to gain at least a partial cover from its head and neck.

None too soon, either!

Chincapin Dan, his face smeared with blood and dust, came leaping down the bank, uttering a savage cry as he caught sight of his escaping enemy.

Swift as thought the Boy Trailer's rifle flew to his cheek; the moment of vengeance had come!

With a wild neigh, the horse flung its head high above the water, lifting its master nearly to his waist into full view as he clung with his hand to its neck; then Wild Hawk gave a short cry; his crippled hand loosed its hold, and both horse and rider sunk below the surface.

The horse rose in sight once more, as it struck against a rock showing nearly a foot above the surface, but Chincapin could see nothing of the rider, even when the animal floated on to plunge over the falls below.

He dropped his rifle and entered the water, swimming out to the rock, resolved to leave naught to chance; but, his quest was in vain. He could find no signs of the body having lodged there.

CHAPTER XVI.

"YOU ARE MY BROTHER, STILL."

THERE they found him, gazing fixedly into the flowing water, lost to all else but the knowledge that he had at last fully avenged the cruel death of his father.

He started like one rousing from a dream, when he caught the appealing cry of Elma, and brushed a hand several times across his eyes before he seemed able to recognize even her, among the rest on the bank.

"Danny—dear brother!"

He saw her arms stretched appealingly toward him, and then he plunged into the water, swimming rapidly back to shore.

"I got him, Elma," he said, softly, as the maiden sunk into his arms, never heeding his dripping state. "He's gone—and pap is paid fer!"

No one asked him any questions; something in his pale, hard face warned them against touching the subject, just then; and in a very few minutes more they were going into camp at a pleasant spot further up the river.

Chincapin Dan gradually brightened up, and listened eagerly to the account given of what had happened at and near the crater after his leaving it in pursuit of his father's murderer.

The Wild Hawks had suffered severely, not only in that mad charge up the hill, but at the hands of Colonel Jo and his cowboys after the defeat and taking to flight.

After supper was dispatched, and all parties had calmed down in a measure, Colonel Jo gravely drew aside with Elma, Dan, his two sons and their cousin, Curly Clark Temple.

In his hand he held the papers found on Jimmy Gee, and his face and voice were very grave and tender as he began speaking.

The story he told is too long to give in full with the space remaining, but its main points may be readily condensed.

"Colonel Jo" and "Major Ed" were twin brothers, and until death divided them, their lives were passed almost as one. They entered the army together, when the civil war broke forth: they fought and won in the same regiment, to the end. They married on the same day, and settled down to a busy life on the same vast stock-farm in Texas.

But, when "Major Ed's" two children were still but little more than babies, both were missing one day, and the closest, keenest, most persistent search failed to recover them, or to learn aught of their fate.

An old enemy was suspected, but Wilder Hawkings proved himself innocent, so far as a perfect alibi could do so. And though for many long and weary years search was pressed in every practicable direction, not even a clew was obtained.

Up to the very morning when Jimmy Gee run his head into a noose!

For in the paper given Elma by Todd Dickerman, was a full confession of the theft and subsequent hiding.

Though Wilder Hawkings took no actual hand in the kidnapping, it was done by his instigation, and in the end one of the children, the eldest, a girl, was placed in care of Todd Dickerman, to raise as his own offspring, until of an age suitable for the final blow which Wilder Hawkings meant to deal his enemy.

Of the second child, a son, Todd Dickerman declared he knew nothing, beyond the single fact that Hawkings told him the child had died, by natural causes. And he learned this only

long years after Elma came into his possession; for up to a very recent date, he never knew aught of the parentage of his adopted daughter. Hawkings let part of the truth drop while partly drunk, on one of his infrequent visits to the cabin home in Kansas.

Dickerman also explained his object in taking that journey: to make money, by restoring the long-lost heiress to her surviving relatives. Yet he felt a strong premonition that death would overtake him before he could accomplish his longed-for ends, and to provide against such a termination, he had written out this statement.

Colonel Jo ended by taking Elma in his strong arms, kissing her tenderly for her dead parents' sake, and cordially accepting her as his niece, and sole heiress to his brother's estate.

And Frank, Will and Curly Temple were only too eager to repeat that hug and kiss, claiming the right by virtue of their cousinship.

And then, with a sobbing cry, Elma broke away and followed Chincapin Dan, who was stealing off through the gloom of night.

"Danny—dear, darling, honest, ever-true Danny!" she sobbed, her head resting lovingly on his swelling chest. "If I'm to lose you, I'd rather never have found my people! Danny—hug me, dear!"

"Fer the last time, Elmy," his tone hardly audible, bravely though he choked back his emotions. "Pap wronged you, an' he was my pap, even ef he was rough, an' tough, an' what some mought call wicked. So—I reckon I'll git over it, Elmy, fer I kin laugh—ha! ha! ha!"

It was a laugh that brought tears to more than one pair of eyes, for it was full of an agony more bitter than death.

"Danny—brother—for you are my brother, still!" her eyes flashing and her arms clinging still tighter as he strove to put her gently from him. "You shall stay, or I'll go away with you!"

Colonel Jo advanced and caught Chincapin Dan by the hand, smiling through the dew that filled his dark eyes and saying, gently:

"Stay, Dan, and be to her the brotler she lost in infancy!"

Of course Chincapin Dan yielded, in the end, for he had no one else on earth to love now, save Elma. And, long before the noble Texan ranch was reached, he was once more the light-hearted "Danny" of the days before that awful tragedy in the timber.

And Curly Temple, even earlier than that home-coming, had completely surrendered his heart to the fair maiden whose photograph he had found on that eventful night, though Colonel Jo made him pledge his honor to keep his secret until after Elma had grown accustomed to that great change in her life.

"A most mighty tremendously great secret—I don't think!" Will Townsend sniffed, his nose high in air. "When I knew it all before we'd been inside the crater ten minutes!"

Jimmy Gee was lost in that headlong charge upon the defeated Hawks, and never turned up to claim a reward for the part he had taken in bringing about that joyous reunion. Doubtless he went back to stealing horses, as "he was born that way!"

It was not a "lucky chance" that led Colonel Jo and his squad of cowboys to the rescue, but was owing to information which he received through a friend to the effect that Jimmy Gee and a gang of rascals full worthy such a chief, were engaged in stealing horses in the very section mapped out by Uncle Billy Breeze for that hunt. And fearing the venomous rascal might try to wreak his vengeance on the unsuspecting hunters, the ranch-owner at once set out to join his sons and their companions, with the result placed before the reader.

"And did Curly Temple really win Elma Townsend?"

He surely did, and just how it all came about, with the important part played therein by Chincapin Dan, deserves a separate story.

THE END.

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